

Colorado - Peaceful River on border of Kansas & Colo

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WILD BILL'S SABLE PARD.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN.



FOR A MOMENT WILD BILL PAUSED TO LOOK BACK, HIS SABLE PARD STILL ON HIS SHOULDER.

Wild Bill's Sable Pard;

OR,

The Pirates of Peaceful Pocket.

BY WM. WEST WILDER,

("WYOMING WILL,")

AUTHOR OF THE "COWBOY CHRIS" SERIES,
"WILD BILL'S WEIRD FOE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WILD BILL "CHIPS IN."

PEACEFUL POCKET was anything but a peaceful camp; the name was a misnomer. It seemed that the very worst characters of the border had gathered at that beautiful spot and made it a place to be shunned by all honest men. Many of the villainous ruffians of Kansas, whose dastardly deeds had been so outrageous they were driven from such places as Abilene, Dodge and Hayes City, had fled over the line into Colorado, and congregated in Peaceful Pocket.

The reputation of the place had spread abroad until most honest men, and all timid ones, shunned the town as if it were cursed by a plague. The ruffianly crew seemed not to care for this, for so long as honest men refused to settle in the Pocket, they would be left to hold full sway there.

It is not probable all the citizens of the little town were absolutely and irreclaimably bad, but the best ones of the place took good care to conceal what little virtue they possessed, as they well knew it would not be "healthy" for them if it became known they were not in full sympathy with the toughs.

One night, not far from the hour of sunset, two persons stood on an eminence overlooking Peaceful Pocket. They were a man and a girl, and at the foot of a little steep that lay behind them two horses were tethered.

The man was a large and well-formed negro, his features being more regular than those of the typical African, while his lips were not so thick and his nose was well-formed. His head was bold and shapely, and there was something about his eyes that denoted both courage and a high degree of intelligence. In short, he was something out of the ordinary run of negroes, having a face that was comely and a manner that was courtly. He was dressed plainly. The contour of his fine figure was something a white man would have been proud of had he been thus perfectly molded.

The girl was of medium height, supple, graceful and handsome. She had the form of a Venus and the air of a princess. She was a perfect brunette, with dark, flashing eyes and the red blood showing warmly in lips and cheeks, making her the picture of health. She was dressed in garments evidently intended for rough service, but everything about her person fitted and clung in a manner that betrayed rather than concealed the curving outlines of her exquisite figure.

The negro was speaking, and his language was excellent, there being no trace of dialect about any word he uttered.

"There is the place, Miss Lea," he said. "We have found our way here without trouble."

"What a beautiful spot!" softly breathed the girl, as if fearful of disturbing the gentle calm that lay over the scene. "I do not wonder this place was called Peaceful Pocket."

"But you remember the stories we have heard of this town?"

"Of course, Joe; but I almost doubt their truthfulness now I am looking down on the camp. Why, it does not seem possible it can be such a wicked town! It seems like a sleepy little mining-camp where the inhabitants are at peace with themselves and all the world."

"Appearances are mighty deceptive, Miss Lea. You know we were warned."

"Still I should not fear to go down there."

The negro looked startled.

"For heaven's sake, do not think of such a thing!" he cried. "You would be a lamb among wolves!"

The girl's eyes flashed.

"The wolves might find one lamb with claws," she half-laughed. "If I only knew! Joe, do you think we are sure of finding Justin Douglas down there?"

"We are sure of nothing, Miss Lea. He may be there—"

"If I knew he was, ten thousand wolves could not prevent me from going to him!" cried the maiden, her red lips exposing her ivory-white teeth.

She did not see the look of admiration in the eyes of her dark-skinned companion.

"I know you are afraid of nothing," the negro said; "but we must have judgment in this matter. We cannot win success by being too bold, for our game will take the alarm and flee. We must come upon him suddenly."

"You are right, Joe—you are always right. I trust everything to you, and be sure you shall be well rewarded."

He made a graceful gesture of protest.

"I am only trying to square the debt I owe you. You proved my friend when I was charged with crime. But for you, I would be in prison now. You championed my cause and interested your father. With his money he brought about a full investigation, and in the end I was cleared. Since that time—"

"You have repaid the debt a dozen times."

"You may think so, but it seems to me I never can pay it. And now that Mister Vernon is dead—"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"Don't speak of that now, Joe," she entreated. "I do not wish to become aroused at present. All I desire is to find the dastardly murderer and the betrayer of my sister! Joe."

"Yes, miss."

"I want you to go down there and investigate. Make such inquiries as you may think best, taking care to be prudent."

"And you, Miss Lea?"

"Will stay here."

"But night is coming on. Surely you want the tent erected, and—"

"There will be a moon. We can put the tent up by its light. That can wait, but I am impatient to know if we are near the end of the hunt."

"But I shall have to leave you alone; you may be in danger."

"Not while I have this handy," and she swiftly produced a revolver. "Do not fear for me, Joe, for I shall be able to defend myself."

With reluctance, the negro finally consented to leave her there, and she watched him go swinging down into the little pocket.

The door of the "Dove's Nest" was standing wide open. Ivory Jaw Jackson, Stuttering Steve and others were loafing outside, while at the bar Pacific Dick was just "surrounding" his twenty-seventh drink, at the same time explaining how he had fooled Horror Zeke into looking the other way, and then had scientifically blown off the whole roof of his head at short range.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the door. Joe, the negro, had appeared.

"Jur-jur-jur-juroosalem!" gurgled Stuttering Steve, starting up in astonishment. "What am that?"

Ivory Jaw Jackson gave a whoop and leaped to his feet.

"A nigger, by thunder!" he howled, showing all his teeth in a fierce grin.

His shout brought the others to their feet, and Pacific Dick nearly fell over himself in his hurry to get outside and take a hand in the row he fancied had been started.

"Who says so?" he bellowed, as he appeared, a huge revolver in either hand. "I kin lick ther onery galoot as says so!"

He glared around inquiringly.

"Who says I'm a nigger?" he again demanded. "Pint ther critter out, an' I'll blow a hole in him big enough ter sling a cat through!"

Then his eyes fell on Black Joe and he uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Blow me blind!"

"That's what I sus-sus-say!" nodded stuttering Steve.

Ivory Jaw Jackson walked around the darky, surveying him from head to feet and grinning after a horrible manner all the while.

"Niggers are purty nigh bad as Chinamen," observed Crook-eyed Clark.

"Pup-pup-peaceful Pup-pup-pocket don't want none o' ther bub-bub-bub-black cusses in it," asserted the stammerer.

"Wa-al, I guess not!" agreed Ivory Jaw Jackson. "Tharfore I nomernates merself ter oncet instanter as a kemitty of one ter eternally knock ther stuffin' out of this dirt-complected son of Ham. Jest stan' afur off an' watch me pulverize him. It will be a sight ter make ther gods weep."

Then Jackson rolled up his sleeves and spat on his hands, still showing his teeth in that ferocious grin.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" appealed the negro. "I did not come here to fight. I am a peaceful man."

"Haw!" snorted Pacific Dick. "He calls himself a man!"

The ruffianly crew roared with laughter, as if they thought such a thing a wonderful joke.

Ivory Jaw Jackson wasted little time. He soon made ready to rush at the negro, who had not prepared in the least for a fight.

"Keep off, sir!" Joe sternly warned. "I do not want to hurt you—"

"Hurt me! Huah!"

Then Jackson made a dash, intending to clutch and throw the negro immediately.

He made a big mistake.

He suddenly found himself caught by the collar and whirled around as if he were a toy man. Then the negro's foot struck that portion of Ivory Jaw's breeches that had received the most wear, an the would-be "pulverizer" was lifted off his feet and sent sprawling on his hands and knees.

This had occurred so swiftly that it literally seemed like a marvel to the discomfited bully's companions. They had fully expected to see Jackson crush the darky with ease, but he had met with a most humiliating downfall, instead.

"Waugh!" roared Pacific Dick. "Ther black dog's a fighter! Down with him, pards!"

Then the entire gang sprung at the unlucky object of their anger.

Joe did not quail in the least. His dark face looked stern and his eyes flashed as he met the onslaught. Straight out from the shoulder he struck, and his hard fists knocked over man after man. It was wonderful the way he withstood the assault. Had he been placed with his back against a wall and had his enemies used no more deadly weapons than he used, he would have whipped them all.

As it was, one of the men who had been knocked down succeeded in getting hold of Joe's legs. Then the black gladiator was overthrown.

With savage snarls the mob flung themselves upon him.

"Don't kill him! don't kill him!" yelled Pacific Dick. "Let's give him a necktie!"

The negro knew in what desperate peril he was, and he fought resolutely after he was thrown. They only overcame him by force of numbers, but they finally succeeded in securing his hands behind his back.

Then, as Crook-eyed Clark sat astride the captive's body, he demanded:

"What is ther verdict of this yere court?"

"Guilty!" was Pacific Dick's prompt response.

"Then," said Clark, soberly spitting out a mouthful of blood and a couple of teeth, "I denounce this yere black-skinned cuss ter be hung by ther neck till he gets so tired of breathin' he don't respire to any great extent. Boys, thar's ther tree over thar whar we do our suspendin'. Come on."

A yell went up from the angry ruffians, and the noose of a rawhide was flung over the neck of the captive. Then Black Joe was jerked to his feet and hustled toward the fatal tree.

The sun had dropped behind the western mountains and the shadows of night were gathering in the deeper valleys. Already a hazy darkness was settling over the Peaceful Pocket.

The brave negro fully understood his position, and he knew he might be dead within fifteen minutes. In truth, it did not seem possible he would live to see the sun rise again.

"Poor Miss Lea!" he murmured, as he was led beneath the tree, and the loose end of the rawhide flung over a limb. "What will become of her?"

"One minute ter blubber," said Pacific Dick. "If you want ter do any prayin', tork lively."

The doomed man remained silent, gazing sternly on his foes. He knew it was useless to appeal to them for mercy. There was no mercy in their black hearts.

"Time's up! Swing him!"

As the order was about to be obeyed, there came a clatter of hoofs close at hand, and a horseman, mounted on a coal-black steed, dashed through the mob, sending men reeling back to the right and left. Beneath the gallows-tree the horse was flung suddenly on its haunches, and then, like a flash, a brace of revolvers appeared in the hands of the rider.

The weapons were turned on the startled throng, and the horseman cried in a clear, ringing voice:

"Hold a little on here, pards! I chip into this game and stake my pile on a pair of sixes!"

As the ruffians stared in amazement, Pacific Dick suddenly cried:

"Blow me blind! It's Wild Bill!"

CHAPTER II.

BLUFFING RUFFIANS.

WILD BILL!

The name was known from one end of the

border to the other, and its owner was feared and shunned by the dishonest ruffians whose relentless foe he ever was.

Will Bill himself has been called a ruffian, but those who denominated him as such were his enemies. It is difficult to fully comprehend the mixed character of the man. When unaroused, no milder mannered man ever breathed; but when he was angered he became a perfect fiend of fury.

Bill was a friend to swear by, for he possessed the courage of a lion and would blanch at no danger could he be of service to a comrade. He seemed utterly devoid of fear, but he was in no way a blusterer or a braggart. His keen blue eyes looked one full in the face, and the grasp of his hand was warming to the blood.

When afoot, the Pistol King, as Bill was often called, was a perfect specimen of physical manhood; and when mounted on his magnificent black horse, he made a picture once seen never forgotten.

Without any hesitation, Bill dashed in among the ruffians of Peaceful Pocket, his handsome ivory-handled revolvers springing to the grasp of his fingers and his words ringing out clearly. The brutal gang shrunk back before the flash of his eyes, and his name passed from lip to lip.

"What has this man done that you are about to hang him up to dry?" asked Bill.

There was no reply, but many a hand crept softly toward its owner's most convenient weapon.

The Pistol King laughed shortly.

"I honestly believe some of you galoots are tired of livin'," he said. "Why, you're actually tryin' to get out your guns when you can see I have the drop—and have it *bad*."

Those words checked the creeping hands more than a threat of instant death from any other man could have done. They all knew the speaker never pulled a trigger in vain, and when he began to shoot somebody would take a tumble.

The rider of the black horse saw he had checked the movement, and once more he demanded:

"What has this man done that you are going to hang him?"

Pacific Dick pushed forward.

"Beggin' yer pardon, pard," he said, touching his hat; "but ther o'nery cuss is a nigger."

Ivory Jaw Jackson was not the man to remain in the background, and allow Dick to reap all the glory of facing Wild Bill, so he also came forward, adding:

"An' kem inter this yere quiet camp 'thout waitin' fer an invite."

Stuttering Steve felt it his duty to say something, so he asserted:

"Ther o'nery skunk undertut-tur-tut-took ter clean out ther tut-tut-town."

Crook-nosed Clark crept up from the background, still spitting blood, and venturing to remark:

"We hev no pertic'ler need of a dentist, but ther black son-of-a-gun extracted some of my grinders 'thout axin' my leave."

"An' so," concluded Pacific Dick, "we consider it our solum juty ter hang him up hyer on this yere tree as a warnin' ter others of his kind ter steer clear of this burgh."

Wild Bill's eyes glistened and there was a stern look on his face. He did not speak for some seconds after the ruffians had explained their reasons for the brutal act they contemplated, but he finally turned to the unfortunate negro, saying:

"What have you to say for yourself?"

Joe replied:

"I came into this town in a peaceable manner. I had no intention of making the least trouble, but these men forced me into a fight. I was obliged to defend myself, and I did my level best."

"Did you have a gun?"

"I had a revolver."

"How many did you shoot?"

"None. I did not draw the weapon."

"Well I'm mighty nigh tempted to let them swing you! If you'd shot three or four of the critters, I'd reckoned you were worth savin'."

There was a strange twinkle in Wild Bill's eyes as he spoke the words, but his face was still as stern and grave as one of marble. Although he had been addressing the negro, he had not taken his eyes off the ruffians.

Darkness was now gathering swiftly, and Bill saw he must work rapidly if he had the advantage of daylight.

"I don't reckon you galoots have any just provocation for wipin' out this yere man," he said.

Pacific Dick growled.

"Bill," said he, "we knows yer, an' we don't keer ter run 'crost yer trail, but just now you're chippin' inter what hain't none of your funeral."

"But which may end by being *your* funeral without any fooling, Pacific Dick," came calmly from the lips of the Pistol King. "I know you for what you are, Dick, and that is the worst ruffian of Peaceful Pocket. You skipped out of Hayes City to avoid me, but I had no call to run you down. All the same, you are wanted there for the shooting of White Hand Hopkins, and I'd get money and thanks if I toted you back."

"I never'll go back alive!"

"Then I might carry your head."

"I hain't wantin' no row with you—"

"Then git!"

The bully of Peaceful Pocket shrunk back and glared at Bill, who had turned one of the revolvers full on the man.

Dick hesitated.

"Git or chew lead!"

"This hain't no fair shake!"

"Well, it's business, you bet!"

"Are you goin' ter set yerself up ag'in' all Peaceful Pocket?"

"It doesn't make any difference what I am going to do. I am in no mood to palaver. Directly I shall begin to shoot and then do the talkin' afterward."

Dick saw he was inviting death by remaining there, and so he fell back.

At this moment a clatter of hoofs was heard once more, and out of the dusk came another horse and rider. Straight into the throng dashed the horse, and cries of surprise came from the men when their eyes rested on the rider.

"A gal!"

"Wa-al, I'm derved!"

"A shemale!"

"Petticoats ur I'm a liar!"

It was Lea, the mistress of the imperiled negro. When she saw Joe's position, she instantly threw off the noose and freed his hands with one sweep of a keen knife.

"For shame, men!" she cried, in a clear and musical voice. "What has he ever done that you should treat him in this way?"

There was no reply.

"It is one of their little jokes," Wild Bill explained, in a courteous manner. "This is the way the gentle citizens of Peaceful Pocket provide themselves with amusement, miss. If they do not have a funeral at least as often as every other day, they think the town is goin' to seed. However, I think they will condescend to forego their pleasure on this occasion."

"Seein' as how thar's a gal in it, I s'pose we'll hev ter," mumbled Ivory Jaw Jackson, grinning in a sulky fashion. "It hain't ev'ry day Peaceful Pocket's honored by ther visit of er ginoowine feminin genderite, but we know how ter treat ther ladies, you bet your shirt!"

"All ther same," cried some one from the outskirts of the drowd, "we'd advise ther nigger an' Wild Bill ter make themselves few round this vicinity."

The Pistol King's eyes were turned toward the spot where the speaker stood, and he sternly called:

"If you have any advice to give, my friend, step up and give it like a man—don't sneak behind somebody's back."

But the fellow had no idea of facing Wild Bill, so he kept quiet.

Seeing the speaker did not intend to come forward, Bill said:

"The entertainment's all over, pards. Thar won't be any more fun here till the next time. Just now you people better go over to the saloon and take a drink all round. Tell the barkeeper I will be over in a short time and settle the bill."

This had the desired effect, the greater portion of the mob uttering loud whoops as they rushed pell mell for the Dove's Nest. The others, muttering beneath their breaths, moved away more slowly, but not one refused to go.

When the last had disappeared, Wild Bill laughed softly.

"They hated to do it," he said, "but they were forced into it. That is a bad mob, and no mistake. Pard," speaking to the negro, "you can consider yourself mighty lucky to get off alive."

"I do, sir," said Joe; "and I know I have you to thank. But for your opportune appearance, I should be hanging from this limb. You have saved my life, and I will not forget it. Perhaps the time may come—"

"There, there!" cut in Bill, rather brusquely. "It is all right and I do not expect anything in return. The moment I sighted that gang, I

thought they were up to deviltry, and so I took a hand. This young lady," gracefully touching the wide brim of his hat, "really did more in dispersing them than I."

"And yet I should have been too late but for you," said Lea. "You must let us thank you, sir."

She held out her hand, and Wild Bill lightly clasped the slender gloved fingers.

CHAPTER III.

THE GIRL'S STORY.

AN hour later three persons were sitting beside a small fire that had just been built in front of a V tent that was pitched in a snug little nook about a mile from Peaceful Pocket. The three were Lea Vernon, Black Joe and Wild Bill.

The Pistol King had accompanied the girl and her dark escort to the place where the negro's horse had been left, and when the cozy nook was found, he aided Joe in putting up the tent. After this was done, all three sat down near the fire the darky lighted.

"It is rather strange to find a charming young lady travelin' through this ungodly country like this," observed Wild Bill, gazing in an admiring but not offensive manner at Lea. "Indeed, had I not been informed you were somewhere in these parts, I should have been completely astounded at your appearance on the scene down there."

Lea smiled. He fancied there was much of sadness in that smile.

"Necessity—or rather duty—brings me to these parts."

Bill was not a man to inquire into other people's business if they showed an inclination to be reserved, so he asked no question, although he remarked:

"This is a dangerous section for a young girl to sojourn in, and I would warn you to be well on your guard. It must be an imperative duty that brings ye here."

"It is."

She looked Bill full in the face, and then she went on with deliberation.

"I believe I can trust you, and I am going to tell you my story. It is something I do not often repeat, for it harrows up my very soul, but something urges me to confide in you."

"If you see fit to do so, miss," returned the noted frontiersman, gravely, "rest assured I shall consider you have done me an honor, and I do not think you will have cause to regret your trust. At the same time, if you do not wish to speak of the matter, by all means remain silent."

"Something urges me to speak. You are a man who knows this wild land and its people. Possibly you can aid me."

"If I can do so, I am yours to command at all times."

"I will not make the story a long one, for it is far from pleasant. To begin with, I have, or had, a twin sister who was my very image with the exception that she was a blonde. Her name was Lois. I loved her, and we were such companions as twin sisters should be."

"My father was a stern man, but at heart a kind one. He honored right and hated wrong. For wickedness he had but little compassion. He was moderately wealthy, and he gave both Lois and myself good educations. Lois was musical; I am not. After she left school, father send her abroad to finish her musical education."

"It was in Paris Lois met a young American—an artist. She wrote me of him, but from her letters I did not dream anything more than a passing friendship had been formed. Still something made me uneasy. There was too much about Justin Douglas in her letters, and not enough about herself and her progress."

"At length she wrote she was coming home. It was sudden, and we were all astounded, father most of all. Mother was dead. We knew she could not have finished her studies, yet she was coming home. It was strange."

"She came. She had not changed much—she was the same dear sister. She did not explain her sudden move at first, and we gave her time to do so."

"The explanation came in the form of Justin Douglas. The young artist had been forced to return to America, and Lois could not remain with the ocean between them. She loved him; he claimed to love her. I was the first to hear her secret."

"For some reason, a feeling that seemed to foretell impending disaster came over me. Girl-like, I burst into tears. Lois held me in her arms and told me all about him—how handsome, how manly, how noble he was. She feared father's sternness; I had always seemed father's

favorite, and she wished me to tell him. I did so.

"As I had anticipated, father was not pleased. Still, he asked to see the young man. Justin Douglas came, and I must confess I was favorably impressed with him. I think father was also, though he said nothing.

"The following day after his visit to our home, the papers were filled with the account of a daring bank-robbery and the murder of the cashier. There were three men concerned in the job, two of whom had been captured. The third, the leader, had escaped. One of the captives had confessed. He said the name of the one who had escaped was Morris Douglas.

"Well, it came out that Morris Douglas was the brother of my sister's lover. You can imagine what followed. I have said my father was a stern man. He forbade Lois ever seeing Justin Douglas again. Poor Lois! Her heart was nearly broken, and I could not comfort her.

"For nearly six months I am sure my sister and Douglas did not meet. Accident probably brought them together. He did not seem like a sneak, so he came boldly to my father. The result was he was shown the door and told never to come there again.

"But Lois would not give him up, even though his brother was wanted for robbery and murder. They had clandestine meetings, a fact which I discovered. I warned Lois, but when that did no good, I told my father. He confronted them when they were together, and, in his rage, he struck Justin Douglas. My sister's lover did not return the blow, but he swore my father should regret it.

"Father feared he would try to abduct Lois, who seemed perfectly fascinated with the man, so he kept my sister under guard, as it were. But that did not prevent the wretch from accomplishing his villainous design.

"One night Lois managed to slip away; in the morning my father was found dead in the library!

"He had been murdered!"

Lois had suddenly arisen to her feet, and she delivered the final sentence with a dramatic effect that caused Bill to catch his breath. The firelight which was falling on her beautiful features showed they had suddenly grown hard and stern.

After a moment, the girl sat down and resumed, speaking with forced calmness:

"Justin Douglas had secured his revenge for the blow my poor father struck him, and a fiendish revenge it was. My father had been robbed and murdered in his own house, and his child had been abducted by the murderer. Of course Lois knew nothing of the man's fearful work, and she had fled with him, thinking father harsh and unjust."

"How do you know Douglas committed the murder?" asked Wild Bill, who was a spell-bound listener.

"The evidence was found in the morning. The knife with which the deed was done was marked with his initials. It was a common clasp-knife, and Joe here remembered having seen it in the man's possession when he first visited the place. That was proof enough.

"Over the dead body of my loved father I swore to hunt the murderer down and save my sister from him, if possible. I put detectives at work, but was not satisfied with that. I felt that I must take the trail myself, and I did so, faithful Joe accompanying me.

"That is the most of my story, made as brief as possible. I have traced the man to these parts. The last I knew, my sister was still with him, but he may have deserted her and left her to die by this time. I have reasons to believe he is somewhere about Peaceful Pocket. If I find him—"

"What then?"

"Wait till the time comes. He shall pay the penalty!"

"Miss Vernon," said Wild Bill, earnestly, arising, "I think I can aid you in running this man down."

"Will you do so?" she eagerly asked, standing before him.

"I will."

Wild Bill was a man who always kept his word.

CHAPTER IV.

A TENDERFOOT ARRIVES.

THE crowd that returned to the Dove's Nest after being balked in hanging the negro was not in a pleasant mood, and the liquor which they drank at Wild Bill's expense did not serve to make their spirits rise. They felt they had been wronged and cheated out of a very pleasant

diversion, for it was not every day they had the fun of hanging a negro.

Some of the men went to supper immediately after getting their free drink and some remained at the hotel. Those who went for their food returned as soon as they had swallowed it. Pacific Dick lay on the bar and proceeded to "fill up."

Crook-eyed Clark mourned the loss of his teeth, but said there was nothing better than whisky to hold in one's mouth when he was suffering from such an injury. Stuttering Steve absorbed so much that was intoxicating that his tongue refused to stammer after the usual fashion, and when he tried to talk he succeeded in uttering about one word in three and gobbling like a turkey the rest of the time.

Of course Ivory Jaw Jackson was around, and his grin would have scared the breath out of a gorilla. He was constantly exposing his wisdom teeth after that horrible fashion, and a railroad train would have jumped the track at sight of him.

After a time the barkeeper shut down on the setting out of liquor and charging the bill to a Bill who was not present and might not show up. He observed he had already chalked \$63.75 against the said Bill, and that was the limit.

Then there were many expressions of sorrow, but every man seemed to feel Wild Bill had done him an injury in not providing for such an emergency.

"I tell ye what," Pacific Dick nodded, as he propped himself up with his back against the bar and his hat cocked over one eye, "Wild Bill has derved nigh run his course. Pard, this yere country hain't got no further use fer a man of his caliber, an' I think it is the duty of us citizens of this quiet and peaceful town to see that his little ball of yarn is wound up."

Stuttering Steve tried to express his belief in such sentiments, but only succeeded in gobbling and nodding in a manner that threatened to dislocate his neck.

"Men of Peaceful Pocket," said Crook-eyed Clark, his words hissing through the breach in his teeth, "it is time for us to rise in rebellion an' show we are not ther galoots ter hev our noble necks ground under ther iron heel of a despot. Why, ef we don't down him fust off, he'll be settin' hisself up as marshal of this yere burgh, an' he'll ruin ther place same as he ruined Abilene an' Hayes. He just drove every man out of them towns 'less said man w'd simmer down an' only do his shootin' when it was necessary. Ef a feller got hungry fer fun an' went out an' shot some cuss as wuzn't no good on yearth, Wild Bill had a way of chip-pin' in an' makin' ther shooter skip ur chew lead."

"Which same is the truth," agreed Pacific Dick, "as I kin sw'ar, fer I wuz one of ther skippers."

At this moment a well-formed and rather graceful man entered the room and came up to the bar. He was dressed plainly and his face was covered with a glossy black beard, but there was a jaunty air about him that proclaimed him something of a dandy under other circumstances.

It was possible he did not consider it "healthy" to "sling on style" in Peaceful Pocket.

"What is all this row about?" he inquired, in a pleasant manner. "I hear there has been a bobbery kicked up in town. Who was the kicker?"

"Wa-al," drawled Pacific Dick, "he is a bad man with a record, an' don't you fergit that!"

"Do you mean to say he is still alive?" inquired the new-comer.

"He am," confessed the leading tough of Peaceful Pocket, but not without a slight show of shame.

"Well, I swear! I can scarcely believe it, sure as my name is Ferris Bloodgood! Who is this mighty chief?"

"Wild Bill!"

Bloodgood recoiled a step, and there were some present who afterward swore the part of his face that was not concealed by his beard turned pale.

"The deuce!" he cried.

Dick nodded.

"That's him," he agreed.

"Wild Bill here!" muttered Bloodgood. "That means blazes to pay."

"You see, it wuz like this, pard," explained Dick. "I wuz standin here at ther bar tryin' ter git a little fuddle on. It wuz my seventeenth drink time, an' thet's 'bout sunset. Suddenly, all ter oncet, 'thout ther least warnin', I heard somebody say su'thin' 'bout a nigger. I 'lowed they might be f'rin' their remark at me, so I pulled pops an' jumped out through ther door,

yoopin' fer ther cuss ter show hisself ter ther front. Waal, w'en I struck ther pizzarro out thar' I foun' myself face ter face with— Waal, whut ye s'pose I found merself face ter face with?"

Bloodgood promptly gave it up. Pacific Dick braced himself hard against the bar, crouched a little, opened his mouth and fairly yelled:

"A nigger!"

At this there was a universal groan from those who had been drinking at Wild Bill's expense. Bloodgood seemed surprised.

"A nigger?" he echoed.

Dick nodded solemnly.

"Shore's yer livin'!"

"What did you do then?"

"Waal, ther boys wuz all round ther black varmint, an' they 'lowed we hed no use fer niggers in this town. I agreed most heartily an' Jackson thort he saw a duty ter wipe ther dark-complected critter out. He spit on his han's an' sailed in, havin' made up his mind ter eternally pound ther corners offen ther nig."

"Well?"

"Jackson is still alive, for which he should be powerful thankful."

"The nigger was a fighter?"

"He wuz a holy horror on ten wheels! He caught Jackson an' turned him into kickin' position, an' then he kicked Ivory Jaw so hard he fell on his teeth in ther dirt."

"What then?"

"I led ther charge; we all sailed' inter ther nigger. Thar wuz a slight disturbance."

"Ther result of which you now behold," observed Crook-nosed Clark, as he opened his mouth and exposed the place made vacant by the absence of his teeth. I s'pose ther black whelp must hev bin a dentist."

"But you downed him?" inquired Ferris Bloodgood.

"Yep," answered Pacific Dick. "We done that same, an' then we led him over ter ther tree whar we wuz ter hang him up fer inspecshun. Ev'rythin' wuz reddy w'en Wild Bill kem whoopin' in on a black hoss with a gun in each han' an' ther devil stickin' out of his eyes bigger then a meetin'-house. He asked wherefore did we do so, an' w'en we explains, he kicks. He said we wuzn't goin' ter hang ther nigger."

"And you let him bluff you?"

"Waal, thar wuz a girl as chipped too, an' she cut ther nig free. We wuzn't fightin' gals, so we kem over an' took somethin' at Wild Bill's expense."

"Where did these people go?" asked Bloodgood, betraying great interest.

"One of ther boys watched 'em an' he says they went up over torruds ther big Split Bowl-der."

"No one followed them?"

"Naw."

"Well, this is getting interesting," asserted Bloodgood. "Wild Bill, a nigger and a girl! And I saw a tenderfoot making this way about an hour before sunset. He asked the way to the Pocket and also inquired if I had seen any strangers. I wonder if he meant these people?"

"A tenderfoot?" eagerly asked Dick.

"Yes, a genuine green."

"Waal thar hain't none come in."

"He should have been here by sundown."

Inquiries were immediately made, and it was learned no one had seen the tenderfoot.

"If he appears, we will make it pleasant for him," grinned Jackson.

To this declaration Stuttering Steve gobbled an agreement.

"We hev bin robbed of some fun with ther nigger," said Crook-eyed Clark; "but we'll more'n git it back from ther tenderfoot."

Bloodgood set up the drinks for the crowd, and just as the men were swallowing the liquor there came a hail at the door.

"Hello, hello! Is this the hotel?"

The man of the glossy black beard set down his glass, saying swiftly:

"The tenderfoot. I'll wager!"

Shack Shoulder Smith, the proprietor of the Dove's Nest, immediately started for the door, and there was a crush at his heels.

Bloodgood was right, it was the tenderfoot. He sat astride a horse at the door.

"This is all ther hotel in town," explained Smith.

"Then here I'll have to stop," laughed the tenderfoot. "I suppose you can provide accommodations for my horse and give me some kind of fodder to stay my stomach?"

"Wal," replied Smith, "you'll find some grass out under thet lean-to, an' while you're lookin' arter your hoss, I'll see if thar's any feed fer ye."

The tenderfoot whistled a little, as if surprised at the idea of attending to his own horse, but he

made no protest. Without a word, he rode the animal round toward the lean-to, and the crowd drifted back into the saloon, their delight written on their faces.

"It's a ginowine sure-nuff tenderfoot!" hoarsely whispered Pacific Dick. "We'll hev a circus!"

"Gug-gug-gug-gug-gug-glory!" gurgled Stuttering Steve, having a desperate struggle to get the word out at all. "We'll gig-gig-gig-give him belly-lool-lool-lool-lool-lool—" And there he stuck. He could not finish it to save his soul.

Preparations were made to receive the tenderfoot. The stranger was not long in appearing, and the moment he entered the saloon and reached the center of the room a wild howl went up from the throat of every man present. Screeching in a manner that would have aroused a dead man, they charged on the amazed tenderfoot.

CHAPTER V. IN DEADLY PERIL.

THE tenderfoot was a young man and a rather handsome fellow, too. There was nothing fresh about his appearance, but he was astounded by his reception. Before he could understand what had broken loose he was clutched by a score of hands and hustled in a manner that threatened to throw him off his feet.

"Whoop!" howled Pacific Dick. "He's a lulu!"

"Bounce him!" shouted Ivory Jaw Jackson.

"Give him ther razoo!" hissed Crook-nosed Clark.

"Goo-goo-goo!" gobbled Stuttering Steve.

The others joined in the medley after a fashion of their own, and pandemonium reigned.

The stranger sought to fight them off, but what can one man do in the center of a howling mob of that sort? He struck out several times, succeeding in rapping the unlucky Mr. Clark on his out-of-plumb proboscis and punching him in the eye.

After the toughs of Peaceful Pocket had hustled the tenderfoot to their hearts' content, they rushed him up to the bar.

"This yere galoot orders drinks fer ther crowd," said Pacific Dick.

"I think you are slightly mistaken, sir," coolly asserted the new-comer. "I do not order anything for such a gang of ruffians."

"W'at?" howled Dick. "Do you hear that, pards?"

Hear it? Well, they certainly did! They howled their disapproval.

"You'd best take that back!" asserted Dick, glaring at the young man. "It won't be healthy fer you ter refuse ter set out ther stuff! We're quiet, peaceful an' timid citizens, but we know our rights."

"And I know my rights," was the bold reply. "I am not going to be run over in this way!"

"Wow!" grinned Ivory Jaw. "He's a fighter!"

"I sh'u'd sus sol!" whimpered Crook-nosed Clark, edging forward. "Pards, kindly survey this yere sufferin' mortal myself! Am I not am I—which am I? This nose of mine is completely spoiled now. It did have a very aristocratic bend in it of which, may it please ther court, I wuz justly proud. I don't mind ther loss of a few teeth or ther fact that my left eye will be draped in mournin' on ther forthcomin' ter-morrer, but this nose—ye gods, this nose!"

It seemed that he was about to burst into tears.

"W'at's ther matter with yer nose?" asked Dick.

"He hit it!" furiously snarled Clark. "It had a crook of which I boasted, but he hit it on the side, an' now I am tormented with fears."

"W'at do ye fear?"

"Thet it'll be straight!"

And he was in sober earnest.

"Stranger," soberly said Pacific Dick, "ther only thing thet kin save your mutton is ter set out ther drinks."

"If I refuse?"

"It'll go hard with ye."

"Well, I never drink myself, and I do refuse."

"Pards, it's a temp'rance lecturer!"

At this a howl arose.

"Make him drink!" yelled a voice.

Dick motioned to the barkeeper, and a glass of whisky was swiftly set out. The chief ruffian of Peaceful Pocket grasped the glass and waved the crowd back.

"Stan' away off so all kin see ther way this yere burg treats temp'rance cranks!" he cried, and the throng fell back.

The young tenderfoot's hand went toward his hip, but, like a flash, he was seized by several strong hands.

"Turn it inter him, Dick!" shouted more than one voice.

"With pleasure—with pleasure," said the bully, as he approached the victim.

Suddenly, the report of a revolver was heard, and the glass in Dick's hand was shattered to a thousand fragments, the liquor spattering into his face.

The startled ruffian reeled backward, a cry escaping his lips.

The throng within the saloon was also amazed, and in the excitement, the tenderfoot wrested himself from the men who had seized him.

"Who fired that shot?" howled Pacific Dick.

"I'll cut his gizzard out! Who fired it?"

Through an open window into the room sprang a man who calmly replied:

"I fired the shot."

It was Wild Bill!

A gasp came from the throng. Bill still held a smoking revolver in his hand, and his eyes were fixed on Pacific Dick. He seemed ready for any emergency that might arise.

The bully fell back against the bar.

"Dern ye!" he growled. "You're alwus chip-pin' in whar ye hain't got no call!"

"Well, I've got a call right here," declared the Pistol King. "I reckon you know me pretty well, Pacific, and you know I mean business when I do take a hand."

"W'at for do you spoil our fun?"

"Fun! Do you call this fun?"

"Yep."

"Well, you galoots of Peaceful Pocket have queer ideas of fun!"

"It's only a little innercent sport."

"You were forcing this man to drink?"

"Yep."

"Against his wishes?"

"Yep. He's a temp'rance crank."

"It makes no difference what he is, if he does not wish to drink, he shall not."

"Now, look hyer, Bill, you spoiled our fun oncet ter-day, an' we hain't goin' ter stan' this."

"So?"

"Yep."

"You will have to stand it, pards."

"Not by er dern sight! Barkeep', another glass."

Wild Bill smiled, but there was something ominous about that smile. He was as cool as if surrounded by friends instead of being in the midst of a gang of men who would have rejoiced at his death.

"Dick," he said, "have you made your will?"

"No."

"Well, I should advise you to do so before ye go on with this. You won't have a chance afterward."

They knew what the man meant, and he was not making idle talk.

Crook-nosed Clark shambled forward.

"This yere critter has disgraced me!" he excitedly declared. "He's knocked this nose of mine inter line, an' that I can't endoor. I'm a quiet an' docile sort of man, but I'll sacrifice my life right hyer ter git squar' with ther tenderfoot."

"Pard Dick, I'll hold ther galoot w'ile you turns the whisky inter him."

Then Clark made a grab at the stranger, but he was not looking for what followed. The tenderfoot objected by striking out from the shoulder, the blow again falling on Clark's nose, knocking the owner of the proboscis down.

Clark scrambled up, feeling of his nose.

"It's all right!" he shouted. "By gosh! he's knocked it back er'gin!"

And his nasal organ had really resumed its lop-sid d appearance.

The mob was moving restlessly, and it was plain an outbreak was impending. Wild Bill knew what that meant, but he did not show the least sign of alarm.

The tenderfoot now turned from the bar, speaking to the man who had shot the glass from Pacific Dick's hand.

"I thank you, sir," he said. "I should not have taken the liquor anyway, but you saved me a great deal of trouble. These men have seen fit to impose on me, but some of them may be called to an account."

This was received with yells of derision from the mob.

All at once, a pistol shot rung out. The stranger dropped like a log and lay still.

Somebody had shot him!

There was a rush toward the body but Wild Bill reached it first. Planting a foot on either side of the fallen man, the Pistol King faced the mob, his weapons leveled.

"Hold up!" he commanded, his blue eyes showing a deadly gleam. "I will down the first man who tries to get at him!"

The rush was checked.

"It was a dastard's shot!" Bill declared. "The cuss who fired it ought to be strung to the tree where you would have hung the negro!"

A hoarse murmur ran over the throng and black looks were cast upon the defiant man. Wild Bill was in the midst of a pack of wolves who thirsted for his life, but he was never calmer.

"I wish the man who shot this tenderfoot down would make himself known," said the Pistol King. "I would like to have a settlement with him."

"We want a settlement with you, Hikok!" cried a voice on the outskirts of the crowd.

"Thet's so," joined in another. "He's sp'iled fun enough fer us!"

"I am here," Bill retorted. "I didn't come to the Pocket with the intention of fighting the whole town, but I can do it if necessary. I don't propose to let you stamp the life out of this young fellow, an' don't ye fergit that!"

The mob pressed forward. Suddenly a missile of some kind came hurtling through the air. Bill did not see it and it struck him on the head near the temple. The blow did not knock him down, but it sent him staggering backward. Something seemed to burst in his head, bright lights flashed before his eyes, then it seemed to grow dark.

"Now's ther time!" howled Ivory Jaw Jackson. "Down with him!"

Through the black mist Bill caught the gleam of knives in many hands and he saw the men rushing toward him.

He understood how deadly was his peril, but at that moment his strength had apparently deserted him.

Was Wild Bill, the hero of a hundred fights, to be "wiped out" in such a manner?

CHAPTER VI. BILL'S BLACK PARD.

No!

Into the midst of the mob dashed a man who had just entered by the window through which Wild Bill came. He uttered shouts that rung through the room, and with his bare hands he sent the men reeling right and left. Before Bill could serve as a sheath for a ruffian's knife the latest arrival on the scene reached his side.

It was Joe, the negro!

"Ther nigger!"

"Thet black skunk!"

"Down with both!"

"Wipe 'em out!"

But the black man seemed like a veritable Samson. At the side of Wild Bill he fought the entire mob back, handling them for the time as though they were pigmy men. One fellow he caught up in his muscular hands and hurled headlong at the mob, thus making something of a human catapult.

Bill saw all this like one dazed, but gradually he was recovering, a streak of blood running down the left side of his face. Joe pressed him back, and they gradually retreated to the wall at the further end of the room.

Finally Bill was himself again, and he discovered that many a man of the mob had drawn pistols. All that prevented the ruffians from using them was the fear of wounding or killing some of their own number.

Again the Pistol King's voice rung out clearly:

"Back, you devils—back, or chew lead! I'll open fire in another moment!"

They knew what that meant. When Bill pulled trigger he did so with the intention of killing. If he opened fire, not a few of the mob would suffer.

But even Wild Bill's command might not have checked the battle. However, something occurred that did check it with remarkable suddenness.

A shrill whistle rung through the room, and in at the open door rode three horsemen, one after another. All were masked.

The crowd fell back as the leader of the masked trio uttered a ringing shout. The battle ceased, and a hush rested on the crowd—the hush that precedes a storm.

"It's ther Trail Pirates!"

"Cap'n Shadder's men!"

"Ther cap'n him own self!"

The mob did not seem much alarmed by the advent of the three masks.

In the brief lull, Wild Bill had time enough to grip Black Joe's hand.

"I won't forget it!" he softly declared. "I was dazed by the blow, an' I'd gone up ther flume a-whoopin' if you hadn't taken a hand just when you did."

Joe said nothing just then, for he was breathing heavily from his magnificent exertions.

"I have come for Wild Bill!" declared the leader of the masks.

The Pistol King started.

"For me?" he cried. "Well, you'll have to take me!"

"That I can do. I am Captain Shadow, chief of the Trail Pirates."

"Well, I didn't know I had an account with you."

"Just the same, I have one with you."

"And you figger on raking me in?"

"I do."

"You never made a bigger mistake in all your life, pard. You will observe I have the drop."

"And I have all these men to back me," with a motion of the hand that included the entire mob.

"Ha! Then all Peaceful Pocket is in sympathy with the Trail Pirates?"

"They dare not disobey Captain Shadow."

"Bosh! They do not want to do so. But you made a mighty big mistake, Captain Shadow, when you thought to take Wild Bill in such a manner."

Then, almost like lightning, the Pistol King fired half a dozen shots. There was a jingling crash of glass and darkness followed, telling the man had shot out the lights.

Then a howl went up from the throats of the mob, and there was a rush for the spot where Bill and his negro companion had stood against the wall.

They were not there.

However, the crowd did not make this discovery at once, and a general brawl followed in the darkness, more than a dozen men thinking they had grasped their game.

The instant he shot out the lights, Bill had grasped Black Joe by the arm and hurried him toward the bar, which was directly away from the windows. He understood the mob would think he would try to make his escape by the window nearest, and so he had not approached it at all.

Not a few of those within the saloon were non-combatants, and they fought their way to the door.

Suddenly the light of a dark lantern with a strong reflector flashed out.

It was in the hands of Captain Shadow, and he turned the light on the seething knot of men, shouting:

"Steady, steady! This will show Wild Bill's position!"

But it was not destined to do so.

In the darkness at one side of the light a spout of fire shot outward and upward. A bullet from a heavy revolver struck and destroyed the lantern.

Captain Shadow quickly answered the shot, but he could not tell with what effect.

Bill was not touched, and, with Black Joe at his side, he escaped from the saloon. He did not linger near, but immediately hurried into the shadows.

At the further extremity of the town the two men halted and listened to the howling that came from the vicinity of the Dove's Nest. Bill drew a long breath.

"Well, I have heard a great deal about this place," he said; "and I must confess it fully meets my expectations. It is a hot town in every sense of the word, and is an excellent place for criminals to take refuge."

"Yes," agreed Joe. "And that is why we are here."

"Yes, it is. I have followed a man here from Kansas, and I fancy the man was in that saloon to-night."

"Is that so, sir?"

"Yes; I believe my man was Captain Shadow. Had I been sure, I would have shot him— No, no! I will take him back to Kansas, as I promised."

"I beg your pardon, sir," put in Black Joe; "I hardly think he could have been your man."

Bill started and turned toward the negro.

"What do you mean?"

"I think Captain Shadow was the man Miss Lea and I are following."

"What, not—"

"Justin Douglas."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"It is not possible!"

"It was the voice of the man who murdered Master Vernon."

"And it was the voice of Dandy Doc, the gambler, who murdered a brother to an old pard of mine. That is what has brought me to this place. Doc induced Nat Harmon into a game

of cards and beat him out of his last dollar. Then Nat discovered him cheating and exposed him. Like a flash Doc thrust a revolver into Nat's face and shot him dead."

"Rufe Harmon, a side pard of mine, is flat on his back in Abilene. He could not run the murderer down, but I promised to do so and bring him back alive, if possible. I have tracked him here, and I think this Captain Shadow is my man."

"And I am almost sure he is Justin Douglas. I longed to shoot him as he sat on the horse, but there was a faint doubt in my mind. Besides that, I wish to follow him to the spot where he had hidden poor Miss Lois."

"It is not probable we are both right."

"No."

"And still something seems to tell me our interest is nearly identical. To-night you saved my life, for those ruffians would have cut me down."

"You saved me from them to-day, and I had a chance to serve you sooner than I thought possible. I did not forget that a few hours before I stood on the verge of death, and you faced the wretches who would have lynched me."

"Joe, you are a brave man."

"But I am black!" came almost fiercely from the negro's lips.

"Your heart is white! I am proud to know you! What is your full name?"

"Joe Armstrong."

"Allow me to re-christen you. From the way you handled those ruffians, you ought to be called Strong Arm Joe. That will fit you better than anything I know, and from this time on you are my pard."

"You are a white man, and—"

"So are you! God made a mistake when he put you into a black skin!"

Joe's bosom swelled with gratefulness.

"I will not forget these words," he said. "You little know how much mental torture I have suffered because of the color of my skin, and you have made me feel happier to-night than I have for many a day."

"Well, do not forget we are pards."

"No."

"Here is my hand."

Then the hands of the black and white pards met.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD HUNCH.

JUST then a panting man came staggering around the corner of the cabin, and nearly ran into them.

Wild Bill caught the fellow by the shoulder.

"Hold up here, pard!" cried the Pistol King.

"Let go!" excitedly commanded the man, reaching for a weapon. "Let go, I say!"

Bill caught the other hand.

"Easy, easy! Nobody's goin' to hurt ye! What's the matter with you?"

Instead of answering the question, the stranger asked another:

"Who are you?"

"I am Wild Bill. Who are you?"

"My name is Robin Rockwell, and—"

The negro gave an exclamation of astonishment.

"Mister Rockwell, is it really you?"

"Yes; who knows me?"

"Joe Armstrong."

A cry of satisfaction broke from the man's lips.

"Then I have overtaken you at last! But where is Miss Lea?"

"She is not far away."

"I had begun to fear I should not find you at all," the man declared. "They told me you had come toward this town. I followed and arrived here a short time ago. I went to a hotel back there, but a mob of men set on me, and I was stunned by a bullet. There was a man who came to my assistance—"

"I reckon I was that man," affirmed Wild Bill.

The young tenderfoot was delighted at this discovery, and he thanked the Pistol King again and again.

"I do not know what I should have done if you had not appeared just as you did," he said. "I was determined not to be bullied into drinking that liquor."

"Which was quite right, though not so mighty discreet. I like a man who won't be driven. But how did you get out of the place?"

"I scarcely know. When I was conscious again, the saloon was dark and filled with a howling mob. I scrambled up and made a rush with some others. The next I knew I was outside. Then some of them recognized me, and I

had to knock over one fellow and take to my heels. Luck brought me here."

"Where is your horse?"

"Back at the lean-to."

"Any other animals there?"

"No."

"Then you remain here with Joe, while I go for the animal. You must not think of going to that place again to-night. It is not healthy for an honest man to spend a night in Peaceful Pocket. He is apt to wake up in the morning and find himself with his throat cut."

"I was warned, but I did not believe the place so very bad."

"It is a very tough town."

Bill left the young tenderfoot and the negro together, while he hurried to the lean-to, hoping he would be in time to secure the horse before some thief got away with the animal.

He was fortunate to find the horse still in the lean-to. The lights had been restored within the saloon, and Bill paused to peer in at a window.

There was an excited mob around the bar, but the three masked horsemen had disappeared. Pacific Dick had mounted on the bar and was haranguing the crowd. Bill smiled grimly, as he listened to the bully's bombastic words.

Like a shadow, a figure appeared at the Pistol King's side. Bill had not heard the least sound, but he felt a light touch on the arm. As swift as a flash, he wheeled, a revolver in his hand.

"Ye won't need ter use it," said a low, rasping voice. "I'm a harmless ole critter."

He saw a round-shouldered, white-bearded man of solid build. There was a prominent "hump" on the stranger's back, and his hat was pulled well over his eyes. He leaned on a heavy knotted stick, and his clothes were rather ragged.

"Who are you?" Bill demanded.

"Me? Oh, I'm only Old Hunch. I'm a harmless old fool—at least, that's w'at ther men of Peaceful Pocket say."

"You may not be as harmless as you look."

"He! he!" snickered the old fellow. "That's so—that's so! You're a keen one, you are! Who be you?"

"I'm a man from Kansas."

"Oh, ho! W'at be they doin' in there? They hev bin raisin' a fearful row. I heerd them shootin', so I kept erway. There's Pacific Dick talkin'."

"Then you know the people of Peaceful Pocket?"

"Well, I reckon!"

"How long have you been in these parts?"

"A right good bit."

"That might mean a week or ten years. Which does it mean?"

"Neither."

"Then what does it mean?"

"That's fer you ter find out. Oh, I am a fool, but I hain't hafe so big a one as you take me fer."

Bill decided the man was a crack-brained old fellow, and felt he was wasting time talking with him. He turned away, leaving the old fellow peering in at the window.

Losing no more time, Bill secured the horse and saddled him. Then he rode back to the place where he had left his Black Pard and the young tenderfoot. They were waiting for him.

"All right," said the Pistol King. "They had not yet got around to stealing the horse, for which you may be sincerely thankful."

The young man mounted the horse in Bill's place, and all three left the town and ascended the slope.

Before they reached the little nook where the tent had been pitched, they were halted by a sharp challenge:

"Who comes there?"

"It is all right, Miss Lea," Strong Arm Joe assured. "We are all friends."

Then the girl came out of the shadows and met them.

"Don't you know me, Miss Vernon?" asked Rockwell, dismounting.

She started back, a little cry of astonishment breaking from her lips.

"Mr. Rockwell—here?"

He lifted his hat and held out his hand.

"Yes, I am here," he affirmed.

She accepted his hand, stammering:

"I—I do not understand it!"

"I will explain to your satisfaction, if you will give me plenty of time."

"You shall have all the time you desire, Mr. Rockwell."

Then they all went on to the little nook where the tent was pitched and the fire still smoldering, Black Joe explaining they had been unsuccessful in learning anything of Justin Douglas.

Lea listened to the words of her faithful black friend, but her mind was still filled with wonder at the appearance of Robin Rockwell. They all sat down near the fire, and a general conversation followed for a time.

At length Bill arose and told Joe he would like to speak to him. By this device the young people were left alone, and Robin was given plenty of chance to explain his appearance in that wild region.

"Who is he?" asked Bill of Joe.

"A young Eastern gentleman. He was aboard a railroad train with us when there was a fearful accident, and he aided me in getting Miss Lea out of the wreck. I believe they fell in love with each other on the spot."

"Well, I hope he is worthy of her, for it is plain she is a splendid girl. If I was younger—But, ha! ha! ha! Hear me talk—a married man!"

Bill and Joe remained away from the camp for a long time, discussing every side of the situation and trying to settle on some plans for the coming day.

Bill declared his greatest fear was for Lea's safety. The roughts of Peaceful Pocket knew she was near, and the sight of one so beautiful might arouse all the evil in their nature.

When the black and white pards returned to the camp they saw at a glance that Robin had explained his presence to the perfect satisfaction of Lea. The two were chatting merrily.

Then followed a lunch from dried beef and water from a spring, and Robin relished it, for he was decidedly hungry. Wild Bill volunteered to obtain provisions from the Pocket on the morrow.

The night passed quietly, much to Bill's relief, Lea occupying the tent and the men remaining by the fire.

Bill was on guard a greater part of the time, Black Joe relieving him toward morning.

For all of his night-watch, the Pistol King seemed as fresh as could be in the morning.

The last of the dried beef and hard-rack served as breakfast for the quartette, and then the horses were attended to.

When this was done, Bill saddled his own black animal and told them he was going down into the Pocket to purchase provisions. He said he should make a detour, so he would not enter the town from the side nearest the camp.

The strange man did not hesitate about entering the lawless town. He rode in as boldly as if every man of the place was his particular friend, and he was not molested.

He knew he was feared by the ruffians of the border, and his very rashness showed them how utterly indifferent he was to their hatred. It did more to keep them in awe of him than anything else.

At the general store of the town he purchased such things as he believed would come of the most use, leaving his horse unhitched at the door.

Of course he was keenly on the alert, but he never seemed more utterly careless and at ease in all his life.

Out of the town rode the Pistol King, and not a hand was lifted to check him. Beyond sight of the place, he made the detour to get back to the little camp. He had almost reached it, when suddenly a man stepped out into his path.

The revolver that sprang to Bill's hand was thrust back into its holster when he discovered the man was Old Hunch. The white-bearded old fellow held up one hand.

"Hold on," he said. "I want ter say sumthin' ter ye."

The rider drew up the horse.

"All right; say on."

"You're known as Wild Bill?"

"I am."

"Last night, down in that town, a band of men swore to have your heart."

"So?"

"Yes."

"How many men?"

"Twelve."

"Did you hear 'em?"

"Yes."

"Where were you?"

"Layin' clost ter a cabin wall; they was in ther cabin. Oh, Old Hunch may be a fool, but he's a sly 'un!"

Bill looked at the man with increasing interest.

"I don't exactly make you out," he confessed.

The hunchback laughed.

"No, no, no! Nobody makes me out! I don't mean for 'em to. He! he! he!"

"Who were the men who swore to have my heart?"

"The bad men of Peaceful Pocket. I know 'em—I know 'em all! Three had their faces covered with masks, but I know 'em!"

"Masked, eh? Then they were Captain Shadow and his whelps."

Old Hunch nodded.

"Yes, yes! And one said he would give five hundred dollars to the man who cut your heart out."

"That settles it!" exclaimed Bill. "Captain Shadow is my meat!"

"Look out or you'll be his. He has menny friends, for he is chief of the Trail Pirates."

"Well, the Trail Pirates are apt to lose their chief before long, Pard Hunch."

"Good! I do not love him. I have said enough, now I will go. Look out fer your heart."

With that warning, the old man easily scrambled over some rocks and disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII.

VANISHED.

BARELY had the gray-bearded hunchback disappeared when Lea Vernon darted from behind a huge boulder and hastened to Wild Bill's side.

"That man!" she panted. "For Heaven's sake, follow him!"

The Pistol King was astounded.

"Why?" he asked.

"He is the murderer of my father!"

"Not Justin Douglass?"

"Yes!"

"Impossible!"

"It is true! He is in disguise, but I recognized him. I would have shot him dead, but I thought of my poor sister. Did I kill him, I might never find her. She might perish where he has left her. I want you to follow him and discover where she is. Do not lose a moment! He will get away while we are talking!"

"My horse—"

"I will take him to camp."

Bill waited no longer. Instantly he swung down, speaking a few words to the intelligent horse and bidding the girl good-by. Then he went over the rocks after the hunchback.

Wild Bill was an expert trailer, but on this occasion he resolved to keep the hunchback in sight, if possible. He soon caught sight of the figure, and he saw the man was walking along at a swinging pace, carrying the knotted stick under his arm.

Then Bill wondered why he had not suspected the man was disguised. He could only account for it by saying he was so occupied with something else that he had not examined the white-bearded fellow critically.

"If he is Justin Douglas, I fancy I see a little light on a point that has puzzled me some," thought Bill.

For more than an hour he followed the man. He took good care to be cautious, and he fancied Old Hunch did not dream he was dogged.

Suddenly a writhing shadow showed on the ground at the trailer's feet, then a noose fell over Bill's head and shoulders and pinned his arms to his side. In a moment he was jerked off his feet and partially stunned.

From behind some rocks leaped two masked men who flung themselves on the insnared Pistol King.

Bill was not conquered, though taken at an advantage and dazed by the shock. He fought with a vigor that amazed the two masks.

"Curse him!" grunted one. "He's a genuine terror!"

The other made no reply, but, clubbing his revolver, struck the desperate man on the head. The blow was repeated twice, and then Bill's hands were secured behind him with the lariat. The masked ruffians sat panting on the ground and stared at their captive when this was accomplished.

"Wal, he's ther *wu'st*!" declared one. "W'y, his head must be harder'n flint ur it'd be cracked wide open!"

"Didn't I tole yer!" snapped the other. "You 'lowed we two wuz goin' ter hev a pie, but I knowed this yere customer. He's a devil!"

Wild Bill's head was still ringing with the blows he had received, but he heard the words which passed between the two men. He made a desperate attempt to break loose, but the men had taken good care to tie him securely.

"No ye don't!" chuckled one. "We hain't givin' ye thet show, you bet!"

"Ketch hold, pard," called the other. "We'll tie him ter this tree, an' ther boss'll finish him w'en he gits along."

Bill was tied with his back against a small tree that grew close by a dense mass of bushes. He saw it was useless to resist, so he made no further struggle. But all the time he was noting the

sound of the ruffians' voices, for he meant to call them to an account some day.

It seemed as if one of the fellows read this determination in the eyes of their captive, for he shook his head and growled:

"You'll never git ther chance ter wipe us out, Bill. This is your last day on yearth. Ther cap'n means ter wipe ye out, sure as shootin'."

Bill said nothing. He was a man of few words on such an occasion, but while his tongue was silent his brain was wonderfully active.

He wondered how it happened that the two Trail Pirates—for he recognized the two ruffians as the men who had accompanied Captain Shadow the night before—were unassisted in their task of capturing him. Where was their chief? They seemed to be waiting for Captain Shadow, but why was not the chief of the Pirates on hand?

Slowly an idea crept into his head. He was not willing to admit even to himself that there was a chance of his having been decoyed, but it really seemed possible.

If Old Hunch had been Justin Douglas in disguise and he had really cared about fooling any one who attempted to follow him, he would have taken greater precautions.

It was possible the hunchback was Douglas but had wished to be followed. In that case was he not—

"Hello there, boys! I see you have the bird! Good for you! This is the best day's work you ever did!"

It was Captain Shadow. The leader of the Trail Pirates had appeared on the scene. He was afoot and his face was concealed by the baffling mask.

Straight up to Wild Bill walked the man, his eyes gleaming through the twin holes in the sable mask. He laughed triumphantly.

"At last!" he cried. "At last!"

There was a world of hatred in his voice. He lifted one clinched hand as if he would strike the captive in the face.

Wild Bill did not quail in the least. He looked straight into the eyes of the outlaw, and there was something about that stern gaze that caused the clinched hand to fall at the side of its owner.

"No," muttered Captain Shadow, "I will not strike you, but I will shoot you through the heart!"

As the words came from beneath the mask, the chief's hand fell on the butt of a revolver.

"Do you intend to give me a show?" asked Bill, his voice steady and cold as ice.

The outlaw laughed.

"A chance—a show!" he cried, derisively.

"Well, you must think I am a fool! I have you foul, and I mean to improve the opportunity. You have killed good men enough, Hikok, and now your turn to be killed has arrived."

"You really mean to kill me?"

"I do."

"For what reason?"

"Do you ask such a question?"

"You heard me ask it."

"Well, it is my life or yours."

"Ah?"

"Yes."

"How do you make that out?"

"You are my deadly foe."

"I never heard of Captain Shadow till I came to Peaceful Pocket."

"For all that, you are my foe."

"Then I must have known you under another name."

"Perhaps so."

"You confess it?"

"I confess nothing."

"Well then, to put it differently, you boast of it?"

"I boast of nothing."

Wild Bill's lips curled in scorn.

"You would have me believe you a brave man," he sneered; "but you have shown yourself a craven coward."

Captain Shadow started, and his hands were clinched.

"Have a care!" he cried.

But the helpless man did not flinch.

"It is the truth," he asserted. "Were you anything but what I say, you would meet me in an open manner, man to man. I will fight you with any weapon you may select. I will even give you the advantage. All I ask is half a show."

The chief of the Trail Pirates shook his head.

"No you don't!" he asserted. "I know your record, Wild Bill. You are a killer, and I do not propose to prove another victim for you. You deserve death for the dastardly shooting of Phil Cole."

"That is the worst thing my foes can bring

against me—at least, they seem to think so. Cole was drunk—it was his life or mine. I was given orders to take him, dead or alive, as he was terrorizing the town. As it was, he fired one shot at me. I returned it, and my bullet found his brain.

"But, bah! What is the use of telling this to such men as you! It makes no difference that my life was in peril. I shot Phil Cole, and for that they condemn me. Well, so be it."

"I am not here to argue this."

"There is no argument. You think you have deceived me, but I know you, Dandy Doc!" Captain Shadow started.

"Well," he said, after a time, "it makes no difference if you do know me. You will be dead within ten minutes!"

"And Justin Douglas will stain his hands with crime once more."

The outlaw chief fairly staggered as if struck. "Justin Douglas!" he gasped. "Gods!"

"So that struck home!" broke from Wild Bill's lips. "I thought it would. Yes, I know you are Justin Douglas."

"I am not—I swear—"

The outlaw suddenly checked himself.

"What is the use?" he cried. "I will not waste my breath. Let me see that you are secure."

He examined Wild Bill's bonds, saying when he had finished:

"A Hercules could not break them. I am not going to shoot you from short range, Wild Bill, but I am going to stand off at dueling distance. Then I will show my men here how neatly I can put a bullet through your heart."

He drew a revolver.

"Come on, boys," he commanded.

The three men walked from Wild Bill, who seemed doomed to die like a dog. What could save him then? Still, though looking into the ghastly face of death, the man did not quail.

Captain Shadow walked as far as he thought best, and then he turned, cocking his revolver and half-raising his hand as he wheeled.

The next moment a cry of wonder broke from his lips.

The tree was deserted—Wild Bill had vanished!

CHAPTER IX.

THE PISTOL KING'S NERVE.

GONE!

To say Captain Shadow was amazed would but poorly express his feelings.

He was dumfounded.

His masked companions were so astonished they could only stare at the place where their captive had been a few seconds before.

As soon as the chief could catch his breath, he burst into a torrent of execrations. He first cursed himself, then he abused his two comrades. And then, all of a sudden, he hastened to conceal himself so Wild Bill could not get a shot at him.

The leader of the Trail Pirates did not think of approaching the spot where the Pistol King had been tied to the small tree. On the contrary, he took good care to keep away. With his two followers, he took good care to make himself "scarce," with a suddenness that told how much he feared Wild Bill.

There was nothing marvelous in Bill's escape.

Barely had he started on the trail of Old Hunch when the negro, Strong Arm Joe, came upon Lea with the black horse. With a few words, the girl explained everything, and Joe immediately expressed a desire to follow Bill.

"He may get into trouble, or something of that sort," the faithful black said. "If I am near, I shall be able to help him."

Lea made Joe promise not to let Bill know he was followed, unless the frontiersman should fall into some trouble or need his assistance. Then Bill's Sable Pard started on the track of the man who had rescued him from lynching at the hands of the toughs of Peaceful Pocket.

It was well for Bill that Joe did so.

Joe did not happen to be near enough to aid the Pistol King when the two ruffians jumped on him, but he soon discovered what had happened.

The thick bushes near the tree to which the captive was bound in a standing posture enabled the negro to approach within a short distance of the spot without being detected. Thus he was able to hear some of the conversation that passed between Captain Shadow and Wild Bill.

If it had been necessary to do so in order to save Bill's life, Joe would have confronted the three Trail Pirates; but he was not rash. He waited for his time to come, and it came when the masked men turned to walk to the spot from which the chief meant to shoot the prisoner.

Like a cat, the black man darted forward, a knife in his hand. With two slashes, he freed the prisoner, and then he swiftly drew him into the thick bushes. This was done in the brief space of time that the outlaws' backs were turned that way.

Under cover of the bushes, Bill and his Sable Pard paused and watched the Trail Pirates. It happened that the Pistol King had not been robbed of his cherished ivory-handled revolvers, and one of the deadly weapons found its way to his hand. There was a deadly gleam in his eyes and Captain Shadow stood on the very threshold of death.

The weapon was half lifted when Black Joe caught Bill's hand.

"No, no!" whispered the negro. "You must not kill him! His time has not yet come, for Lois is not found."

It was difficult for Wild Bill to crush back the hot anger in his heart. His very soul seemed aflame with a desire to put a bullet through the heart of the outlaw chief. He was on the verge of one of his "devil spells," as Bill's outbreaks were once called by a side pard of his.

Nothing but a thought of Lea and her mission restrained the Pistol Dead Shot and saved Captain Shadow's life.

Bill fully expected the chief of the Pirates would come back to discover in what manner he had made his escape, and then he knew he would be forced to confront him.

But Captain Shadow was too wise or too cowardly to do such a thing. He saw Bill was gone, and he realized the man might be waiting for him. The thought sent a shudder of horror down his spine, and he lost not a moment in seeking cover.

Something that was half a laugh and half a growl escaped Wild Bill's lips as he witnessed the outlaw's sudden rush to cover.

"The craven dog!" he said. "He turned so pale that I could distinguish his loss of color from this distance. He will lose no time in getting out of this vicinity."

Which was right.

Bill watched for a time, but none of the Trail Pirates showed themselves. At length, he turned to Joe, asking:

"How in the world did you happen along at such a lucky moment?"

Joe explained.

"Well," said Bill, his manner being impressive, "I never did a better job than when I saved you from the toughs of Peaceful Pocket. In return, you have twice rescued me from certain death. Joe, I'll swear by all niggers, if they are like you!"

The darky's eyes glowed with pleasure.

"Thank you!" he said, simply.

"I am the one to thank you," asserted Bill. "I am proud to have such a pard!"

Joe's embarrassment was evident, and he stammered when he attempted to say something more.

After a time, they went out and looked for the Trail Pirates, but the three men had disappeared, taking care not to betray which way they went.

"Well," observed Bill, "we will have to let them go for this time, but I am not done with Captain Shadow by any means. I am now certain he is Dandy Doc, the man I have followed from Kansas, and I believe he is also Justin Douglas."

"And the hunchback whom Miss Lea said you were following?"

"I think that is another disguise of this miserable villain. He wanted to be followed, and that was why he did not try to throw me off the trail."

"Oh, I hope we shall find Miss Lois alive and save her from this man!"

"I hope so, too; but the only way I see of saving her is to kill the miserable whelp who lured her from her home."

"Miss Lea has taken an oath to kill him. She means to avenge her father's murder."

"And you?"

"I have also taken an oath."

"So?"

"Yes."

"To what effect?"

"To prevent Miss Lea from staining her hands with blood."

"You do not mean to allow her to kill the villain?"

"No."

"How do you intend to prevent it?"

"I will kill him myself!"

Bill smiled grimly.

"I will save you the trouble," he calmly said. "That man is my game. When Lois is found, then I will take him back to Kansas, or I will shoot him! He failed in his attempt to wipe

me out. Twice has he been baffled—the third time is mine!"

There was nothing bombastic about the manner in which the words were uttered, but there was something terribly ominous in the speaker's air. Plainly he meant everything he said.

The black and white pards turned back toward Peaceful Pocket.

Bill took care to make sure they were not being followed, for he did not wish to be shot in the back by his enemy.

They little dreamed what they would discover when the camp was reached.

Straight to the spot where the tent was pitched they made their way.

A startling spectacle met their gaze when they reached the little glade.

The tent had been crushed to the ground and was trampled and torn, while there were many other signs which indicated a desperate struggle had taken place there.

Robin Rockwell and Lea were not to be found. This discovery nearly crazed Black Joe. He would have rushed aimlessly about the place, but Bill caught him by the arm and held him fast.

"Quiet, pard!" he said, sternly. "Hold your level! I want to examine sign here, and I could not do so after you had run all over the place and tramped the marks. If you will give me a little time, I am sure I can tell something near what has happened."

"Is it not plain enough what has happened?" wailed the negro. "They have come upon her here and she has been dragged away!"

"They—who?"

"Our foes."

"But that does not answer the question. Give me five minutes to examine the place."

It was difficult for Joe to restrain his despair, but he waited as patiently as possible while Bill slowly and keenly inspected the signs made on the ground. He seemed to read them as if they were print.

"The toughs of Peaceful Pocket have been here," he declared, at length. "They have taken the girl and the young tenderfoot captives. The tenderfoot fought like a tiger, but they overpowered him by force of numbers. I do not think there was any blood shed. Probably Rockwell did not dare use his guns, and the men of the Pocket did not wish to shoot him."

"Do you think we shall find them down in the town?"

"I trust so."

With that Bill looked for the horses.

They had not been molested.

The Pistol King smiled a bit as he noted this. "They did not dare take my horse," he thought. "In this part of the country it is considered a greater crime to steal a horse than to kidnap a woman or kill a man."

After caring for the animals, which only occupied a few moments, Bill looked to his weapons. Joe was watching his every movement, and he now ventured to ask:

"What do you mean to do, sir?"

The Pistol King lifted his magnificent head, a queer look in his blue eyes.

"I am going down into Peaceful Pocket and find the girl and the tenderfoot," he calmly said.

"The ruffians will be waiting for you."

"I know it."

"They will try to kill you."

"Yes."

"There will be a hundred of them."

"Nearly that."

"Still you are going down?"

"If there were five hundred, I would go down."

"Then I go with you!"

"It may be to death."

"Where you dare go, I will follow."

A look of satisfaction passed over Bill's face. "I knew it," he said. "You are made of the proper material. It is often boldness that wins in dealing with such men as the citizens of Peaceful Pocket, and we will make a bold play to-day. Come on."

Straight down into the camp they went. The first person they met was Ferris Bloodgood. When he saw them, the man of the glossy beard glanced hastily around, as if to discover if he was observed by the citizens of the pocket. Then he hastily approached Bill and his Sable Pard.

"Look here, Wild Bill," he swiftly said, "you want to get out of here. I tell you this as a friend. I have just come from the Dove's Nest, and your cake is dough if the gang there gets sight of you."

The Pistol King did not seem a bit alarmed.

"Is that so?" he coolly inquired.

"It certainly is," Bloodgood nodded. "I don't profess to be a saint, but I do hate to see a man of your caliber wiped out without a show."

"They do not mean to give me a show?"

"No."

"Just what do they mean to do?"

"Riddle you the moment you step in at the door."

"Do you know anything about their capturing a young lady and a tenderfoot?"

"Yes."

"They did so?"

Bloodgood glanced nervously around and then nodded.

"They did."

"Where are the captives now?"

"In a back room in the Dove's Nest."

"Then to the Dove's Nest I go."

"Man alive, you are mad!"

"Well, yes, I am a little r'iled."

"That is not what I mean. You are crazy!"

"I reckon not."

"Well, I have warned you. I dare not remain here longer. If Pacific Dick's crowd knew I gave you a pointer, it would go hard with me."

Bloodgood hurried away, and Wild Bill walked straight toward the Dove's Nest.

His Sable Pard kept at his side.

CHAPTER X.

TWO AGAINST THE TOWN.

WILD BILL did not hesitate about entering the Dove's Nest. When he reached the door of the saloon, he drew his ready revolvers and kept straight on.

Strong Arm Joe also drew a revolver and followed.

They entered the saloon, and found a crowd of the worst men of the Pocket there. Pacific Dick was taking a drink at the bar.

The appearance of Bill and his Sable Pard was noticed, of course, but not one of the ruffianly crew appeared to see them. The Pistol King had expected trouble the moment he showed up in the place, and he was somewhat surprised when not a man seemed to observe him.

However, Wild Bill was not a man to betray surprise, and he walked straight toward Pacific Dick, whom he had singled out. Dick's back was toward the door, and he did not turn. The Pards heard him say:

"Why don't ye git in a fresh supply of p'ison, Shack? You hev been workin' this stuff over tell it's in bad shape. This yere manufacturin' of yer own bug-juice is played out, an' we respectable an' peaceful citizens of this gentle town are led to demand su'thin' better. Hell—"

"Is where you are mighty apt to go!" said a stern voice, and Wild Bill's hand fell on the bully's shoulder.

Dick uttered an exclamation and reached for a weapon, but the cold muzzle of a revolver was thrust against his temple.

"Hands off!"

He turned till he could see Wild Bill's gleaming eyes, and then he obeyed quick enough.

Black Joe faced the mob of spectators, sharply watching for some preconcerted move on their part, but they all had the appearance of men who were very much surprised.

"W'at's ther matter now?" sulkily demanded the threatened Dick.

"As if you do not know!"

"Waal, I'm dad blamed ef I do!"

"You lie like a dog when you say it!"

The teeth of the bully grated a little, and there was anything but love in the look he shot the Pistol King.

"You hev a great way of makin' that kind of talk w'en you holds ther drop," he sneered.

"It is well to have the drop when surrounded by a gang of wolves like as I am now. I'm not such a very big fool, Pacific Dick, as you ought to know by this time."

"Waal, what do ye want?"

"The girl."

"Ther gal?"

"Yes, and the tenderfoot."

"W'at tenderfoot?—w'at gal?"

Wild Bill's teeth clicked.

"You know what girl and what tenderfoot. There is no use in trying to play off."

"Waal, thar hain't bin but one gal an' one tenderfoot in this yere town of late."

"Exactly."

"An' you mean them?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I don't know a blamed thing 'bout 'em."

"All the same, if you have any great desire to continue livin', you'll take me to the place where they are."

"Don't know anythin' 'bout 'em," Dick sullenly insisted. "W'at in blazes do you come ter me fer? I know ther gal wuz right peert, but I hain't no dandy an' I don't go chasin' arter petticoats."

"You know as well as I what has happened to the girl and the tenderfoot, and, as you are the leader in all deviltry perpetrated in these parts, I have come to you. I mean business, and I am not going to fool with you all day, you can bet your sweet life!"

Bill was holding himself well in hand, but an outbreak was impending. When it came—well, there might be cold meat in Peaceful Pocket.

Black Joe said not a word, but his eyes were restlessly roving from face to face of those who were watching the controversy between the bully of the camp and the Pistol King. He almost expected some one would try a snap shot at Bill, and he meant to prevent such a thing, if possible.

The crowd was silent, breathlessly regarding the two men near the bar. Everybody seemed to feel that bloodshed was imminent.

Nobody sought to interfere—they knew it would be anything but "healthy."

"That will not wash, Pacific Dick," came sternly from Wild Bill's lips. "You ought to know better than to try it on me."

"It's honest Injun."

"It's crooked!"

"No, no!"

"But I say it is! I have you under my gun—you want to bear that in mind. You're goin' to talk or eat lead, and that right soon!"

"You fergit my pards."

"No."

"Ef you shoot—"

"You'll go under."

"Ther gang'll wipe ye out ther next minute."

"I'll take my chances."

"You're not that big fool."

"I'm here for biz or blood. You ought to know what that means. If you do not, so much the worse for you. I'll have the truth, or I'll give Peaceful Pocket another subject for its cemetery."

Dick resolved to appeal to the crowd.

"Pards—"

"Thar—that'll do!"

The Pistol King's words silenced him before he was fairly begun.

"You will do your talkin' to me," Bill declared. "You will have plenty of time to talk with them later—if you talk straight with me. If not—Come, come! I have wasted too much time with you already! It is not my way to chin like this."

A desperate look settled in Pacific Dick's eyes. What should he do? He could not back down and "squawk" before the very eyes of the men over whom he had lorded it so long, and to whom he had a hundred times declared he did not fear Wild Bill or any other man alive.

A scheme flashed through his head. He would talk for time; something might turn up.

"Bill."

"Well?"

"You won't believe I tell ther truth."

"Is that to be wondered at? You were always known as an amazing liar."

"Well, w'at's ther use of my tellin' ye anythin', then?"

"There is no use of your telling anything but the truth."

"You won't believe if I tell ye thet."

"Well, try it."

"W'at has happened ter ther gal an' ther tenderfoot?"

Wild Bill scowled.

"I am asking you questions, remember that!"

"But, if I dunno w'at's happened, how'm I goin' ter tell anythin'?"

"Look here, Dick, I see through your little game. You are talkin' for the sake of usin' your mouth. It won't work. If you don't come to the point instant, I'll throw you cold! That's business straight!"

What was to be done? Dick asked himself the question, but could devise no reply. He saw a deadly glitter in the eyes of the man with the revolver, and knew he could not fool with him longer. He opened his mouth to speak, but he did not utter a word.

At this instant, there came a shrill shriek from a back room—a feminine cry of distress.

"Help! help!"

"That's Lea's voice!" shouted Black Joe, excitedly.

"Help! help!"

Again the cry rung out.

Then there were hoarse shouts in masculine tones, followed by sounds of a desperate struggle.

For a brief time, all within the saloon seemed spellbound with astonishment.

The struggle in the back room quickly terminated in a heavy fall.

Then came a pistol-shot!

The next instant the door was burst open and a man staggered into the saloon, blood running down the side of his face.

It was Crook-nosed Clark.

"I'm shot!" he hoarsely cried. "That devil broke free in some way and got the revolver away from me. I flammed him down, but he fired inter my face!"

Then he threw up his hands and fell to the floor.

Like a flash, Wild Bill's foot kicked Pacific Dick's feet from beneath him, and the bully went crashing to the floor. Then Bill made a dash for the door of the back room, Joe being a bit in advance.

The negro plunged through the open doorway, but Bill turned and covered the mob.

The gang was just recovering from its amazement, and in another moment they would have rushed for the room.

Like the blast of a bugle, the Pistol King's voice rung through the saloon:

"Stop!"

That checked the rush.

"The first man to advance dies in his tracks! I have you covered!"

A score of hands were on the butts of revolvers, but for some reason, not a weapon was drawn. It seemed to every man as if Bill's eyes were fixed on him alone, and they all knew the deadly work that would follow should the Dead Shot begin to pull trigger.

Pacific Dick scrambled to his feet.

"It's all right, pards!" he cried, triumphantly. "Ther back door's nailed up tight, an' we hev 'em all like rats in a trap!"

A murmur that was half a cheer ran over the crowd.

"We've got ye trapped, Wild Bill!" laughed the bully of the Pocket.

"Don't be so sure of that!" was the cool retort. "I still have my guns, and my pard is at my back."

"But what'll you two 'mount ter 'g'inst ther hull town?"

"Well, we will show you before we are done. You will find us two extremely hard men to down."

"But down you'll go, just ther same. This is w'at we wuz countin' on—gittin' you inter a trap like this."

"I fail to see the trap."

"Waal, you're in it. Thar's no way of gittin' out of that room thar 'cept through this yere saloon."

"Then we'll go out through this saloon!"

"You'll be kerried out w'en ye do!"

Of a sudden, Bill heard heavy blows behind him.

The roughs of the Pocket also heard the sounds, and they looked into each others' faces in surprise.

What was the meaning of it?

"Ther tut-tut-tenderfoot's tryin' ter break dud-dud-down ther door!" shouted Stuttering Steve.

"That's so!" cried Pacific Dick. "Some of you galoots git outside an' stop him w'en he breaks through!"

"The first cuss who tries to leave this room chews bullets!" declared Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XI.

A RUN FOR LIFE.

AND he meant what he said.

The mob knew it.

Pacific Dick ground out an imprecation and sought to draw a revolver.

Quick as a flash, one of Wild Bill's revolvers covered him, and the Pistol King cried:

"Hands up, Dick!"

The bully hesitated, but he saw the hammer of Bill's revolver rising before the pressure on the trigger. Another ounce would send a bullet into his body.

Up went his hands.

Crash, crash, crash, sounded the blows. The building shook beneath them.

It was a singular spectacle—one man holding a score and a half at bay.

But that one man was Wild Bill!

And there was not one within the saloon but knew the particulars of his fight with the McCandless gang, in which he had, single-handed and alone, whipped ten of the most desperate and bloodthirsty border ruffians, killing eight of them in the struggle.

Little wonder the toughs of Peaceful Pocket did not care to arouse the devil in the man who

had them covered with his deadly ivory-handled revolvers.

The silence that fell over the room was only broken by the heavy blows which resounded through the building.

Then came a great crash!

The back door had been broken down!

"They will escape!" cried a man in the center of the throng. "They must be stopped!"

"You are too late to stop them now," asserted Bill.

"But we hev you in a trap, dern ye!" grinned Ivory Jaw Jackson.

"An' we'll make it hot fer ye, ur I'm a lul-lul-liar!" stuttered Steve.

"You are welcome," was the retort. "But you have not caught me half so much as you think."

With that Bill suddenly gave a backward spring that carried him into the room behind him. At the same instant Black Joe shut the door and threw into place a heavy cross-bar.

Howls of surprise and dismay came from within the saloon.

"Where are the tenderfoot and the girl?" asked Bill.

"Gone," was Joe's reply.

"How?"

"On horses."

The Pistol King was astonished. The door had been broken down from the outside, and this also surprised him. He sprung to it and saw Robin and Lea dashing away on some spirited animals. At the same moment he saw some of the men who had been within the saloon starting in pursuit of the escaping couple.

But what amazed him the most was the sight of a man who stood by the open door, a heavy ax in his hands.

It was Old Hunch!

"You?" he cried; "you?"

"Yes, I," nodded the white-beard. "I broke down ther door, ef I be an ole fool."

Bill was strongly tempted to shoot the man, but something restrained him. He seemed to forget his peril for the moment, but the hunchback did not.

"There hain't any time ter be lost," swiftly said the old man. "Now's your time ter git out. Ther crowd's watchin' ther tenderfoot an' ther gal."

"And you?"

"I am all right. The men of Peaceful Pocket will not harm me."

Black Joe was at Bill's side.

"Come!" said the negro, swiftly. "We will make a run for life."

They started out, hurrying toward the nearest cabin, intending to keep it between themselves and the saloon as they fled.

They were seen!

A yell went up and several bullets whistled about them, but, fortunately, they were untouched.

Darting around the corner of the cabin, they started on the run for life.

Black Joe was a swift runner, and he succeeded in keeping at Wild Bill's side, which was no easy feat.

"We shall be fortunate if we get off," said the negro.

"Never say die, pard," returned Bill, cheerfully. "We are out of that rat's trap, for which we may be thankful. The chances look much brighter now than they did awhile ago. There was a time when I felt as if our goose was pretty well fried."

They could not waste their breath in talk.

Once more yells were heard behind them, and again a shower of bullets whistled dangerously close to their heads.

At that very instant the Pistol King had turned to look back and he happened to strike his foot against a stone that sent him to the ground.

A furious shout of joy broke from the mob, for they fancied one of their bullets had brought him down.

As he arose to his feet, Bill fired two shots.

Neither bullet was wasted.

Two men went down.

Black Joe had whirled when his comrade fell, and he asked, with anxiety:

"Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit, pard," was the cheerful reply; "but there are a couple fellows back there who are."

Once more they ran onward.

The downfall of two of their number checked the desperadoes for a moment, but they soon came on again. They were thoroughly aroused, and they did not mean to let the black and white pards get away.

Bill took good care to lead them in a direction

almost directly opposite that taken by Robin and Lea.

"If we can reach the rocky gully down there," he said, "we ought to be able to give those fellows the slip."

They headed for the mouth of the gorge and dashed on.

The pursuers evidently divined their intention, for they made still more desperate exertions to overtake them.

The limits of the town were passed and the mouth of the little gorge was close at hand. An occasional bullet would go singing past them.

"We'll make it all right," said Bill.

"They will still pursue us."

"Not much!"

"How will you stop them?"

"With bullets."

The gorge was reached and Bill crouched behind a bowlder, turning his blue eyes back toward the pursuing mob.

One of the desperadoes was far in advance of his companions.

"That fellow will have to go under," calmly observed the Pistol King.

The next moment Bill's right-hand revolver spoke, and the man went reeling forward on his face.

The others instantly halted. They saw Wild Bill was ensconced behind a bowlder that would protect him from their bullets, while he could rain a perfect shower of death into the midst of them.

They held a consultation.

"Well," observed Bill, as he ejected the empty shells from his revolvers and replaced them with fresh cartridges, "that brought them up with a round turn. It stopped them much more suddenly than I expected. I fully believed I would have to kill five or six before they would chain up."

The desperadoes were talking excitedly, evidently trying to agree upon some plan of action.

"What are we going to do?" asked Joe. "We cannot remain here and keep them back. They can gain the top up there and riddle us or roll stones down on us."

"And that is just what they are discussing," nodded Bill. "It is time for us to make ourselves scarce."

"They will see us when we go away."

"Not if we can help it."

"Well, how are we to help it?"

"I will show you," replied Bill, after he had carefully glanced around. "Do you see that little gully there?"

"Yes."

"Well, we must keep this bowlder between us and the mob out there till we reach this end of that gully. Then we'll have to creep down it till we can reach the cover beyond."

"Can we do it?"

"We can try."

"All right."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then go ahead. I will remain here and make it warm for the gang, if they try to make a rush."

Joe did not hesitate, for he knew it was the only thing to be done, so he at once began to creep away, taking care to keep the bowlder between himself and the toughs. In this way he reached the bowlder, and, lying flat on his stomach, wiggled his way down to the bushes below.

Occasionally Wild Bill would show himself to the band of ruffians, but he kept his person concealed the most of the time. At length a low whistle came up from the bushes below, telling him his pard had reached their cover.

Then Bill arose and deliberately sent two bullets whistling into the knot of men, causing them to scatter precipitately.

Having done this, the Pistol King dropped on his hands and knees and crept away after Joe.

He reached the little gully, and, pressing himself close to the ground, crawled to the bushes below. Once fairly beneath their cover, he found himself with Joe, who was waiting.

"We're in luck!" laughed Wild Bill. "They have not smoked our little game, and probably still think me behind that bowlder. Now we shall have no trouble in giving them the slip."

He led the way, and Joe followed. As he had said, they found no trouble in getting away, although they were within hearing when a chorus of savage yells told the mob had discovered it was tricked.

"Let them whoop," said Bill, grimly. "They can yell till their throats are sore, for all we care. We are beyond their reach for the present, and the ruffians of Peaceful Pocket have

been bearded in their den. They will never get over the disgrace of this day."

They circled the town, moving toward the spot where the tent had been pitched.

"Do you think we shall find Miss Lea there?" asked Joe.

Bill shook his head.

"It is not at all likely, pard. 'It is my horse I am thinking of. I only hope I can get there ahead of the toughs. If they touch that animal—'

He did not finish, but the look on his face spoke as plainly as words. Blood would flow if the black steed had been stolen.

They reached a point where they could look down into the town, but their observation told them nothing. They wasted but little time.

As they approached the spot where the tent had been, Bill grew very cautious.

"The devils may attempt to ambush us here," he explained. "We must look right sharp."

They saw not a sign of the ruffianly crew, and soon they reached the spot where the horses had been.

Had been—for they were gone!

A furious exclamation of anger escaped Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LOST IS FOUND.

REVOLVER in hand, the Pistol King leaped to the spot where the horses had been. He could hardly credit the evidence of his eyes.

"Gone!" he grated through his clinched teeth. "Stolen! Well, the thieves shall pay dearly for this!"

There was a terrible look on his face, which told he was now thoroughly aroused.

But at this moment, Strong Arm Joe made a discovery. A bit of paper was fluttering from the trunk of a tree at one side of the glade.

"See there!" cried the negro, pointing toward it.

Wild Bill saw the paper and sprung forward to secure it. At a glance, he saw there was writing upon it. He snatched it down, and his eyes eagerly ran over the scrawled words. Then an exclamation of relief broke from his lips.

"It's all right!" he declared.

"What's all right?"

"Everything."

"How do you make that out?"

"This was written by the tenderfoot. After the pursuit was given over, Rockwell and Miss Lea came here and took the horses away."

"Then they were not stolen?"

"No."

"Good!"

"You may well say so. But I wonder where the tenderfoot and Miss Lea are at this moment?"

The couple were miles away, riding to the north.

An hour before they had sat in the little back room of the saloon, both bound to chairs and Robin gagged. Crook-nosed Clark held a revolver against Rockwell's head and swore he would blow the young man's brains out if Lea cried for help. In the main room of the saloon they could hear Wild Bill threatening Pacific Dick with instant death.

But Robin was not as helpless as he looked. In days gone by, he had often amused himself with what is known as "the Great Rope Trick." He would allow himself to be tied by any one, and the rope might be knotted in fifty places; then, in the concealment of a cabinet, he would release himself in less than half a minute.

It is not necessary to explain here how the trick is done, but there is a great deal in the swelling and expansion of muscles. When the rope was knotted about Robin's wrists, he took good care to expand the muscles so his wrists were unusually large. Then his hands were fastened behind the chair, and when the right time came, he quietly worked them free from the ropes.

Then, at a critical juncture, he flung himself on Crook-nosed Clark.

The attack was wholly unexpected, and Robin succeeded in wresting the revolver from the ruffian's hand.

But the chair still hung to the young man, bound there by the ropes he had not found a chance to loosen. Clark saw this and he grasped Robin in such a manner that both went crashing to the floor, while Lea's cries for help rung out.

Then the revolver exploded in Robin's grasp, and the bullet ripped along Clark's cheek, making a wound that was painful and disfiguring, but in no way dangerous.

The rascal scrambled to his feet, thinking himself fatally injured, and fled into the saloon.

Robin tried to arise from the floor, but, with the chair still bound to him, he was unable to do so.

Lea could not aid him, for she was also fast to a chair.

What could be done?

Was all the desperate stroke for liberty to prove profitless?

Robin began tearing at the knots with his fingers, and then a man came bounding into the room.

Black Joe was on hand!

At the same moment, Wild Bill's voice rung out in the command that prevented the ruffians from rushing toward the door, at which he stood, weapons in his hands, and held them off.

The negro instantly leaped to the side of his young mistress.

"Miss Lea—"

"Help Mr. Rockwell, Joe," commanded the girl. "Quick—cut him free!"

Joe hastily produced a knife, but he first cut Lea free; then he released Robin.

"You were just in time," declared the young man. "But now how can we get out of here?"

"Here is a door."

They tried it, but it was nailed fast.

"By Heaven! we are still in a trap!" gasped Robin, his face paling.

At that very moment the first blow fell on the door from the outside. They started back astounded, staring at it as it shivered beneath the terrible shocks it received.

"Who can it be?" they asked each other. "Is it friend or foe?"

The question was soon to be answered. The door shivered and split before the blows, and then it came crashing into the room.

And there stood Old Hunch, ax in hand!

Lea uttered a low shriek and started back, as her eyes rested on the man.

Hunch did not seem to notice this.

"I am here to save you!" he said, swiftly, seeming to forget his dialect in his excitement.

"Here are horses at the door. Mount them and ride for your lives! It is your only chance!"

"But you—"

"I'm all right. Go, go!"

It is not certain what Lea would have done, but Black Joe caught his young mistress up in his strong arms and ran to the nearest horse with her. As if she were a feather, he tossed her up on the animal's back.

"Joe!" she remonstrated—"Joe, that man—"

"It is no time to think of that now," declared the negro. "If the devil himself shows you a way to escape death, will you not accept it?"

"Joe is right," said Robin, who had swung up to the back of the other horse.

"Go!" cried Old Hunch again—"go, go!"

Joe struck Lea's horse with his open hand, and the animal sprang away. Robin kept at her side.

Then the faithful negro sprang back into the saloon to be at the side of the man who called him "Pard."

"What will become of them—what will become of poor Joe?" gasped Lea, as she clung to the mane of the horse.

"They may be able to escape in some way," replied Robin. "That old man—"

"That was Justin Douglas!"

"Impossible!"

"I know it seems so, but it is true. I recognize the voice."

"But why should he dare so much to save you?"

"That is more than I can tell."

They heard the yells of those in pursuit, and Robin looked back.

"The fools!" he half-laughed. "Do they think to overtake us afoot? Well, that is just the thing, for it will give Wild Bill and Joe a chance to escape."

Before they passed out of the town he saw the black and white pards running for their lives, with a mob in pursuit. The ones who had at first started after the girl and the tenderfoot turned back to fall into the other chase.

Thus the young man and the girl were permitted to escape, while the desperadoes of Peaceful Pocket tried to capture or kill Wild Bill.

They decided to go at once to the place where they had pitched the little tent, and they did so. There they found the horses.

"We must not remain here, for this is the very place where those villains will look for us."

"And we must take the horses away," said ready-witted Lea.

So they decided to leave a note that, if it fell into the Pistol King's hands, would inform Wild Bill his horse was all right. This they did, and afterward they rode away to the north.

"Where shall we go?" asked Lea, helplessly.

"Anywhere, so long as we get beyond the reach of the men of Peaceful Pocket. They are perfect tigers! That is the worst place I ever heard tell of! Why, I never dreamed such a place could exist in a free and enlightened country like this!"

"I cannot go away," asserted Lea, grimly.

Robin looked surprised.

"Why?"

"Lois is not found—my work is not done."

"But you must leave that place for a time. When you are safe beyond the reach of those wolves, I will agree to go back there, if you want me to. I am ready to do anything for you."

"But the danger—"

"The danger is nothing, so long as I am doing anything in my power to assist you."

His gaze sought her eyes, but her lashes drooped. For all of the excitement and peril through which he had just passed, he was actually making love to his beautiful companion!

"You are very kind," she softly said.

They rode on and on, the other horses following. She was on her own horse now, and in her side-saddle, which made it much easier for her.

They scarcely knew whither they were going. Away to the north they went, mile after mile being passed.

At length they came to a little pocket-like valley, and exclamations of astonishment broke from their lips as they beheld a tiny cabin with the door standing wide open.

"A cabin!" cried Robin. "Somebody lives here!"

"And they may be friends!" laughed Lea. "If so, we are in luck, for now the tent is ruined."

"And night is near at hand!" said the young man, glancing upward. "It would not be pleasant to sleep in the open air. Let's ride forward and see who lives here."

Onward they rode, and the sound of horses' hoofs fell on the ears of the single inmate of the cabin. She sprang up and hurried to the door, just as Robin and Lea drew rein there.

Then came the wild cries of recognition.

"Lois!"

"Lea!"

The lost sister was found!

CHAPTER XIII.

ACCUSED.

WITH a glad cry of delight, Lea slipped down from the saddle and the sisters were quickly clasped in each other's arms, laughing and crying all in a breath.

Robin Rockwell was astonished. He could scarcely believe by pure chance they had come straight to the one for whom Lea was searching.

"Lea, my sister!" cried Lois, holding the other off to look in her face, as if a doubt still lingered in her mind. "Is it possible?"

"It certainly is, Lois," was the glad reply. "But oh, I have searched for you so long, and I have feared I should never find you."

"But you—here—away out in these wilds! I cannot understand it! It still seems as if I might be dreaming!"

"It is no dream, sister mine—I am here."

When Lois was convinced, she would have drawn her sister into the little cabin, forgetting in her excitement there was another.

But Lea did not forget her escort.

"Mr. Rockwell—"

"I will attend to the horses," he hastened to say.

He did so, giving the sisters time enough to come to something like an understanding.

"Lea," said Lois, as she pushed her sister to a chair, "I am still unable to understand your being here."

"I will explain it all in a few moments," assured Lea, as she looked around and saw the interior of the cabin was unusually cozy and comfortable for that remote section.

Lois noted that glance, and she tossed back her golden hair, as she quickly said:

"You must not look for the luxuries of the East, sister. This is a wild section, and we have done as well as we could."

"Well!" How that little word grated on Lea's ears. She actually turned pale and looked for the man whose hands she believed were stained with her father's blood.

Lois noted her pallor, and she quickly reached her side.

"What is it, Lea? You grew white so suddenly and looked around as if afraid."

The brunette remembered it was probable Justin Douglass was not about, as she had seen him in Peaceful Pocket, many miles away.

"It is nothing Lois—wait! I will tell you soon. Let me look into your dear face. You look happy—"

"And I am."

"Does no sorrow mar your life?"

"No—yes! There is one."

"What is it?"

"The thought that I had to leave you and dear father in such a way."

Lea caught her breath and clasped her hand to her heart. Lois had sunk on her knees at her sister's feet, but she started up, crying:

"What is it, Lea? I am sure it is something! Tell me—tell me the truth!"

Lea rested one trembling hand on the golden head at her knee.

"Wait. It was only a little pain. I have lots to ask you. Where—where is—"

"Justin?"

A nod was the reply. Lea could not bring herself to utter that name just then.

"He has gone to Peaceful Pocket."

There was no longer any doubt—Justin Douglas and Old Hunch were one and the same.

"When will he return?"

"He said he might not be back till after night-fall."

"Lois, does he—does he always—treat you well?"

"Treat me well! He treats me as if I were a queen! And I am—the queen of his heart!"

Lea turned her head aside, for she did not wish her sister to see the look in her eyes.

"And you—never—regret?"

There was a moment's pause, and then the girl-wife slowly replied:

"Yes, Lea, I do sometimes."

In a moment the eyes of the sisters met, and Lea breathlessly asked:

"What—what do you regret?"

"You frighten me!" said Lois, drawing back.

"You act so strangely! I cannot understand you at all!"

Lea's arm slipped around the other's neck and their heads were close together.

"Do not be alarmed, sister mine. Answer my question, please. What do you regret?"

"That I was compelled to separate myself from my home and friends."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Does—does he seem the same as of old?"

"Just the same—no, better! I understand him now. Lea, my husband is one of nature's noblemen! He has a heart as large as his whole body, and he is so tender and kind!"

The black-haired sister bit her lips to keep back the hot words which were trying to force an utterance, and she took good care that Lea could not see her face. The happy little wife rattled on:

"You know you thought he was handsome and manly in the long ago—"

"When I first saw him."

"Yes. Well, he is still handsomer and more manly now. Oh, you will fall in love with him when you see him—you can't help it!"

"God pity her! God pity her!" the listening one was crying in her heart.

"He is so gentle and good, and he loves everything that is brave and true. The one sorrow of his life is the thought of his brother's crime."

"Why did he bring you away out here—why bury you in this wild and lonely place?"

"It was to escape his brother, who he declares is demented. Morris Douglas has sworn to ruin him—to destroy his life. He fancied Justin turned against him when they were boys."

"Has he heard from his brother since—since the crime?"

"Yes, twice—both times a threat. That was one reason why we came here. Another reason was that he wished to drop out of the world, and give it time to forget he was in any way connected with the Douglas who perpetrated the crime."

Lea fancied the explanations were faulty in the extreme. Not for a moment did she believe those were Justin Douglas's true reasons for making a home there in that spot, so far from the bustle and whirl of the world. No, no! He, like his brother, was a criminal, and he had sought to hide from the stern hand of the law.

"Lois."

"Sister?"

"I have sad news for you."

The golden-haired one started up, gasping:

"Father—"

"Yes, it is of him."

"What—what is it? Tell me—tell me the truth! He—he is dead?"

Lea bowed, sadly.

Then the girl-wife gave a great cry and sunk back at her sister's knees, burying her face in Lea's lap and wildly sobbing:

"Oh, my father, my father! Dead—my poor old father!"

Her grief was genuine and deep, and the dark-haired sister did her best to abate it. At length she said:

"Do not give way so at this, sister, for there is worse to hear."

Lois started back aghast.

"Worse?" she gasped. "What can you mean?"

"What I have said."

"Worse? Impossible! Nothing could be worse!"

"Ah, but you do not know all!"

"I know I left my dear old father in anger—left him with rage in my heart—and now he is dead! I have never seen him—I have not heard his words of forgiveness! That is one thing I looked forward to, for I fancied he would relent. Oh, God! it is terrible!"

Her agony was heartrending.

"Great Heaven!" thought Lea. "What will she do when she knows the truth? It will kill her!"

And then she began to believe it would not be possible to tell her sister the truth then. Still, if she did not do so, how was she to induce Lois to go away—how was she to get her from the man whose hands were stained with the blood of her old white-haired father? That was a question she could not answer.

It was growing dusky within the room. The sun had set and night was coming on.

Robin came in from attending to the horses, and Lea was glad of that, for it turned their thoughts and their conversation for a time.

But she knew the worst must soon come, for Justin Douglas was liable to appear at any minute. She did not fear the man, murderous wretch though she believed him, but she knew he would try to baffle her in getting Lois away.

Having thought of all this, Lea found a chance to leave her sobbing sister in a chair and draw Robin Rockwell aside.

"Mr. Rockwell," she swiftly and softly said, "what is to be done?"

"Explain the drift of your question, and I will try to answer it to the best of my ability."

"My sister is living here with the man who murdered our father, and she did not till a moment ago know of father's death. She will not believe Justin Douglas his murderer."

"No?"

"No."

"Have you told her?"

"Not yet."

"Then how do you know she will not believe it?"

"From what she has said. She thinks the man is all that is noble and true, and it will take more than my word to convince her to the contrary."

Robin grew thoughtful, but Lea hastened to say:

"There is no time to be lost, for Justin Douglas may appear at any time."

"I know of no way to get her away till after you tell her the truth."

"It is so hard—so hard!"

"I know it."

"I fear it will break her heart!"

"I see no other course."

Nor did Lea, so she went back to her sister, having first lighted an oil lamp, for it was not quite dark.

"Lois, I must tell you all, for I want you to go away from this place with me."

Lois removed the handkerchief from her face and gazed at her sister in astonishment.

"Go away?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"You do not mean that—where? Oh, I know! you want me to go back home."

"You must fly from this man you call your husband."

As if touched by electricity, the weeping girl was on her feet, amazement expressed on her face.

"What are you saying?" she cried. "Did I hear aright?"

Lea went to her and took her in her arms.

"Yes, Lois, you heard aright. It is for that reason I am here. I have come to save you."

"To save me?"

"To rescue you from a human monster."

Lois placed her hands on her sister's shoulders and thrust her back so their eyes met.

"I do not understand this kind of talk!" she hoarsely declared.

"How can I make it plainer?"

"By talking straight to the point. Lea, I see

you are avoiding telling me something. What is it?"

"It is of father."

"Father! What—speak! What horrible thing is this I see in your face and read in your eyes? Tell me—tell me, or I shall go mad!"

"He was killed."

"Killed?"

"Murdered!"

Lois would have fallen, but Lea held her fast.

"Murdered!" she gasped. "By whom?"

A dark form appeared in the open doorway. Justin Douglas had returned!

With one arm about her sister, Lea pointed an accusing finger at the man in the doorway.

"Yes, murdered!" she cried; "and by that dastardly wretch!"

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWED.

SATISFIED the horses were not in the hands of the toughs of Peaceful Pocket or the Trail Pirates, Bill and Joe turned from the spot, leaving the ruined tent where it lay crushed to the ground.

"We will trail them," said the Pistol King.

Barely had they started on the trail when they were confronted by Ferris Bloodgood.

"Hist!" he cautioned, holding up his empty hands. "I cut ahead to warn you."

Wild Bill had him covered, but he lowered the weapon.

"Of what?" he asked.

"Danger. The gang is coming."

"From the Pocket?"

"Yes."

"Coming this way?"

"Yes. They thought you might come here. You gave them the slip over you, but they still swear they will have your heart."

"They will be welcome to it when they get it."

"Well, I didn't know but they might catch you at an advantage if you were not warned."

Bill looked keenly at Bloodgood.

"Look here," he said, "if you are such an honest man, what makes you live in such an infernal hole as Peaceful Pocket?"

"I do not live here."

"You are living here now."

"Only for a short time."

"Well, that is enough."

"I have my reasons. There are other honest men in the place."

"Well, I reckon they are mighty few and far between."

"I cannot deny that, but they are there."

"They do not dare assert themselves."

"No."

"Well, they had better get out of the place."

"That's what I intend to do. But I must hustle along, for I would not have the gang think I had been giving you pointers. They will be here before long. Good-day."

Bloodgood hurried away.

Bill shook his head.

"I don't know what to think of that man," he declared. "He may be straight goods and he may not."

"There's something about him I do not like," asserted Joe.

"Well, there's something about him I do not like, but he seems all right."

"His eyes are restless and wild."

"I have observed that. But he says the men of the Pocket are coming. We had better move along."

The trail was plain enough, and Bill had no trouble in following it almost at a run. No sign of the crowd from Peaceful Pocket was seen.

Away went the pards on the trail, but it was not always so plain. They came to sections where it was necessary to follow it much more slowly, and night shut down before they reached the end.

"We shall have to stop right here for the night," said Bill. "Early in the morning we will again take up the trail."

They little dreamed they were not much over a mile from the end of it.

"I am as hungry as a dog," declared Bill.

"And so am I," confessed Joe. "What's to be done?"

"Not a thing to-night. In the morning we will be able to find game of some kind. We will have to tough it out, pard."

With the coming of night, a cold wind drew through the ravine. They sought shelter in a niche behind some bowlders, and built a fire for the warmth it would give out.

Joe wished to stand guard during the first of the night, declaring his hunger was so acute he could not sleep.

Bill took a brand from the fire, and, going to a mass of bushes, began to search about with the aid of the light.

In a few minutes he returned, bringing some scrub-like bushes which he had pulled up by the roots.

They had discovered a place where the water dripped down the rocks, and there Bill washed the dirt from the roots.

"There," he said, dividing with Joe, "this will furnish our entire repast for to-night. Chew those roots, but do not swallow them. The juice will serve to make you forget your hunger for a time."

So they sat down by the fire and chewed the roots, talking the while.

"One thing that is hard for me to understand," observed Bill, "is that Old Hunch—who is Justin Douglas, you say—should have helped us all out of that scrape in the Pocket."

Joe shook his head.

"I can't understand it myself," he said.

"Is it not possible there is a mistake?"

"What kind of a mistake?"

"Old Hunch may not be Douglas."

"I do not think there is a doubt about that."

"Well, the whole business is somewhat mixed. That Hunch is Captain Shadow I am pretty sure. He led me into a trap in a way that I despise, but you got me out of it. The man seems to be playing a double part—that of an honest old fool and a desperado. Why he should do so is what sticks me."

They were silent for some time. Outside the circle of fire-light, it was dark down there in that little niche, but the moon was creeping up so that the ravine would be lighted at a later hour.

After a while, Joe spoke:

"I wonder where Miss Lea can be."

Bill shook his head.

"You know as well as I."

"I hope she has shelter of some kind, yet what shelter could she find?"

"There is little chance of finding shelter in these parts. But I think Rockwell will do his best to watch over her. They are probably crouching beside a fire somewhere. He will guard her through the night."

"He appears like a fine young man."

"Yes, his appearance is certainly in his favor. And it is plain that he is desperately in love with Miss Lea. Otherwise, he would not have followed her to this wild region."

"Miss Lea will not think of love till she has found Miss Lois and knows her father's murderer is punished for his awful deed."

"She may not mean to think of love, but—"

"But what?"

"Well, I read her secret in her eyes when she met the tenderfoot. She loves him already. A man with half an eye could discern that."

Joe could not deny it, for he had seen the same thing.

When they had chewed the roots for a time, the negro declared that he did not feel in the least hungry. Bill smiled and declared:

"You will feel the craving of hunger all the more acutely when the effect of this stuff passes. Then you will think that you can eat boot-leather or anything else."

Joe insisted on standing guard the first part of the night, for Bill thought it was best that one of them should remain on watch while the other slept. So the Pistol King lay down and left his Sable Pard on watch.

Joe replenished the fire and walked about for a time. Then he sat down and watched the line of moonlight creeping down toward the bottom of the ravine away to the right. He saw it would not touch the spot where they had built the fire, for the walls above shut it out. But away back along the ravine through which they had come it was creeping down to light the bottom.

The long-drawn howl of some prowling animal sent a chill down the negro's back, for it was mournful and weird.

The hours slipped away.

Joe had almost fallen into a drowse when something aroused him. He knew not what it was, but he started up, looking around.

A dead silence seemed to rest over everything. The moonlight was now flooding the ravine to the right.

Something attracted Joe's attention down there. The fire had died down, but he stepped into the deeper shadow and gazed down toward the place where a broad patch of moonlight lay between two dark blotches of shadow.

He saw something moving! It was swiftly creeping across the moonlighted space!

"What is it?" Joe asked himself. "It seems like some kind of an animal."

The figure disappeared, and then, after a moment, another was seen skulking across the patch of moonlight.

"Two of them!" thought the negro, his hand seeking his revolver. "And they are coming this way?"

What was that?

Nothing but the hooting of an owl.

Joe fancied the sound did not seem natural, and something seemed to warn him of impending danger. Then, as he watched, he saw still another figure skulking across the moonlight patch.

He decided to arouse Bill.

A touch was sufficient. The Pistol Dead Shot sat up in a moment, wide-awake.

"What is it?" he cautiously asked.

"Come here."

He arose and Joe drew him into the shadows.

"Look down there."

Still another figure was crossing the moonlight patch!

"That is the fourth I have seen. And hark!—there it is again!"

The foot of the owl came up from below.

Something like a growl escaped Bill's lips.

"The dogs of Peaceful Pocket!" he softly exclaimed. "They are on our trail! I imagine the whole town is down here."

"What's to be done?"

"Well, I feel like remaining right here and giving them a battle, but it would not be good policy. We must get out. Come."

As they started to steal away in the dark shadows, the hoot of the owl again came up from behind them.

It was answered further up the ravine!

"The devils are on both sides of us!" grated Wild Bill.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WHITE PARDS TURN.

THE situation was startling, to say the least. The men of Peaceful Pocket had located their position and taken care to come upon them both up and down the ravine. As the walls were very precipitous at that point, there seemed no way of escape.

"We are in a trap!" whispered Joe.

"That is what those whelps of Satan think," calmly answered Wild Bill; "but it will have to be a mighty strong trap to hold us, pard."

Bill was one of the never-say-die kind, and he never relinquished hope while life lasted. His indomitable courage carried him through a score of difficulties which would have resulted disastrously for a common man.

There was nothing common about Jim Hikok.

"What can we do?" asked Joe.

"Fight, if we have to," was the quick retort.

"But there are so many of them that—"

"The more the merrier. But we will give them the slip if possible. Come on; follow me, and keep close in the shadows here. They will find a deserted fire when they reach this nook."

Bill led the way, skulking along close to the wall where the shadows were dense, the white moonlight lying ten feet to the left.

Wild Bill's eyes seemed as keen as those of an owl, for they apparently discerned every suggestive shape in the darkness.

To the ears of both men again came the hooting signal of the ruffianly crew creeping like assassins upon their intended prey. These rascals knew Wild Bill, and they hoped to catch him napping. They had no relish for an open fight with him, for all of their numbers.

Suddenly Bill came to a place where two large boulders lay within less than three feet of the perpendicular wall of stone. At the same moment he detected moving figures ahead—figures advancing toward them through the shadows.

Quick as thought, Bill caught his Sable Pard's wrist and crouched close to the ground. He did not even whisper a word, but he set the example by creeping in behind the boulders. It was a close squeeze, but he succeeded in getting in, and when Joe followed he was compelled to crawl half upon Bill's body.

There they lay and listened. They heard the sound of cautious footsteps, and then a soft voice saying:

"Remember, pards, it's death ter Wild Bill. Thar hain't ter be no foolin'."

"I reckon we've fooled with him ernough," was the almost whispered retort.

"We'll wipe him out this time sure."

"Perhaps you will, perhaps you won't," thought the object of their remarks. "I'm givin' heavy odds ye don't."

As soon as the party had passed on and they thought it safe to do so, the pards backed out of their place of concealment.

But they made an error in doing so so soon.

There was one straggler who had not passed, and he saw the two dark figures rise up by the rocks.

He knew they were not his friends, and with a wild yell, he snatched out a revolver and began firing.

Black Joe went down with the first shot.

The man only had a chance to pull trigger twice, and then Wild Bill's revolver spoke.

That was enough. The man plunged forward on his face and lay still.

But the mischief was complete—the whole party was alarmed.

Bill knew there was not an instant to lose.

Thrusting his revolver into its holster, he stooped

and caught hold of his Sable Pard. Joe groaned as he felt Bill's touch, and muttered:

"Done for! Save yourself!"

But the Pistol King had no thought of deserting the man who had twice saved his life. With a mighty surge, he flung the negro across his shoulders and started to run.

Up to that moment, but one man had seen them, and he would never tell of it. But Bill understood it would be impossible to keep out of sight now the alarm was given.

Along the gulch he fled, still keeping to the denser shadows, but taking good care not to stumble and fall. He ran with wonderful swiftness for one so heavily laden.

But he was soon forced into the moonlight.

Then a cry arose far behind him.

The hounds had sighted their game!

For a moment Wild Bill paused to look back, his Sable Pard still held on one shoulder. As he did so, Joe whispered:

"It's no use! You may as well drop me and make good your escape. You will not be able to get away like this."

"Keep cool," was Bill's command. "I have not forgotten what you have done for me."

"But I am wounded. Those devils will overtake you and kill you!"

"Live or die, we will stick together, pard!"

With that assertion on his lips, Bill took to flight once more.

The broad strip of moonlight was soon passed and the black shadows that lay beyond were reached. But Bill was beginning to pant in a manner that told how severely the pace and the burden were telling on him.

Once more Joe entreated to be put down.

"Keep still," commanded the other. "It is my turn now."

"But I am stronger—I think I can run all right now. Let me try it."

Bill had no objection to that, and so he placed the negro on his feet.

At first Joe was not able to run very fast, but he seemed rapidly to be gaining strength.

All this time the pursuers had been rapidly gaining on them and were so near they sent an occasional pistol bullet whistling past the fugitives.

"This is not funny at all," muttered Bill. "If they get any nearer, I shall have to try my hand at shooting."

But that did not become necessary. They suddenly came to a place where they could take any one of three courses, and it happened the pursuers could not tell which one was chosen.

"This way!" hissed Bill, and he led the way down a gully, at the foot of which they plunged into some thick bushes. Looking back, they saw their enemies come to a halt above, plainly uncertain which course to take.

"We'll fool 'em right here," softly whispered Bill.

"Follow and do not make a noise."

They stole silently through the bushes.

And right there was where the pursuers were deceived. They were compelled to choose a course by chance, and they did not choose the right one. The pards got away without any further trouble.

"That was another close call," observed Bill; "but we pulled through. That they meant business was plain from the fact that they followed us so far and took so much pains to locate and come upon us from both sides. They meant to wipe us out that time."

"But you were hit, pard—how bad?"

"Not very bad, I think," was the reply, but Bill noticed Joe's voice was husky.

"It may be worse than you think. Stop here and I will examine it."

Joe objected.

"No, no. This is no time to stop!" he cried in a manner that surprised Bill, for it was full of fear. "They may find out their mistake and come this way. Let's keep on!"

"There is no danger of that now," assured Bill.

"You had best let me look at your hurt, pard."

But Joe would not consent, and he hurried on as if he still dreaded pursuit. There was nothing for Bill to do but keep at his Sable Pard's side.

After a time, Joe asked:

"Don't you suppose we can find Miss Lea to-night, Bill?"

"There is little chance of that," answered the Pistol King, noting his pard's voice was husky and faint.

"It seems as if I must find her to-night!"

"It would be an accident if we did."

Then, after a brief silence, the negro almost whispered:

"Did you ever think of dying, Bill?"

"Well, I don't allow myself to think much about it," was the reply. "I fancy it unnerves a man to be thinking of such a thing."

"I have thought of it some. Death is strange." "Death is something we all must face, sooner or later. Every man must take his turn, whether he wants to or not. The end of the trail is bound to be reached, and a fellow will have to pass in his chips."

"I don't want to die before I see Miss Lea again."

"Die!—why, you are not going to die, pard? Look here! you are not giving it to me straight! You are hard hit, and you've got ter let me look at the wound! I'm not goin' to have you keel over here at any minute!"

"Hark!"

Joe paused and held up one hand.

They listened.

"I thought I heard shots. I did. There they are again."

Bill heard them, too.

"It must be our foes!" whispered Joe, in fear.

"It is in the wrong direction," assured Bill. "It is none of the party that we just escaped from."

"Then who can it be? Let's go forward and discover. Come, come!"

Joe was filled with sudden eagerness, and they hurried toward the point from whence the sounds came. As they advanced, they began to hear the shooting much more plainly, and they finally were able to discern the cries of human beings.

In the course of time they came to a place where they could look down into a little pocket.

A singular and exciting spectacle was presented to their view.

At one side of the Pocket was a burning cabin. On the outer edge of the circle of firelight a number of horsemen were riding about. They wore masks.

As the pards looked a rifle-shot rang out, and it came from the cabin, telling there were human beings within.

"Those are the Trail Pirates with Captain Shadow, their leader!" softly exclaimed Bill.

Joe grew suddenly excited.

"And I believe they have Miss Lea and Mr. Rockwell penned in that cabin!" broke from his lips.

"They will be burned to death! Come, Bill, come! we must save them!"

And before Wild Bill could prevent the fool-hardy act, the negro rushed down toward the masked horsemen!

With a revolver in either hand, the white pard followed.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN A DEATH-TRAP.

STRAIGHT at the figure in the doorway pointed the accusing finger of Lea Vernon.

Justin Douglas was there!

"That man is the murderer of my father!"

It was a terrible charge, and the one accused seemed dumfounded by what he saw and heard.

Robin Rockwell's hand fell on the butt of a revolver, and he glared at Douglas in anything but a friendly manner.

With a cry of horror, Lois caught her sister's arm.

"Lea, Lea, Lea! what are you saying? Are you mad? You must be crazed!"

"I mean what I say—Justin Douglas killed our father!"

Then the new-comer started forward, exclaiming:

"Lea Vernon, you here?"

"Yes, I am here—I have tracked you down, blood-stained wretch that you are!"

"You must truly be mad!"

"I am as sane as I ever was in all my life, and you know it! You killed the poor old white-haired man whom you hated! You were not satisfied with stealing his daughter from him, but you must have his life!"

"It is not true! Mr. Vernon dead—impossible!" He seemed truly amazed and shocked, but a look of contempt, scorn and loathing rested on Lea's face.

"You play your part well, Justin Douglas!" she cried; "but you cannot deceive me. Mortimer Vernon is dead, and his blood cries out against you. It was your hand that struck the fatal blow!"

Justin Douglas lifted his hand above his head, his smooth face looking grave and earnest.

"As there is a God in heaven, I swear—"

"Stop! Do you think I would believe a creature so vile, even though he were under oath? Swear to nothing, for it is useless. The evidence against you is damning!"

"The evidence?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"The knife with which the deed was done."

She took a step toward him as she spoke the words, her eyes searching his face. He did not start and show guilt, much to her disappointment. She began to believe he had nerves of steel.

"Is that not enough?" she cried. "It was your knife—yours, yours!"

"Impossible!"

"It is true!"

"My knife—no, no!"

"It was marked with your initials."

"Still I say it was not my knife!"

"Ah! but it has been identified as yours!"

"By whom?"

"Joe Armstrong."

"Black Joe?"

"Yes, Black Joe."

Still the man insisted.

"There is some mistake! Great God!—to think you should believe I would do such a thing! It makes my blood run cold! Kill your father—kill the father of Lois! I would have taken my own life before I would have done such a thing!"

"That sounds well, but the words are such as come to the lips of a dastardly wretch!"

"But he was her father—the father of my wife!"

"Your wife!—have you made her that?"

"I have."

"More likely you have deceived her by a false marriage!"

"No; the marriage is legal."

"I do not believe it?"

"She has the certificate."

"It makes no difference—even that might be a cheat. I do not believe such a creature as you can do an honorable thing!"

Justin Douglas's face was very grave and stern, and he came forward fearlessly.

"You are unjust," he said, with a calmness that was forced. "This little woman is my lawful wife."

and before the God of Heaven I swear I know nothing of the killing of your father!"

"God!—you do not fear even Him!"

Involuntarily, Lea retreated a step before him and Robin Rockwell stepped forward, as if to protect her. Like a flash, Justin Douglas wheeled toward the young man, demanding:

"Who are you? What do you want here?"

"He is a friend," declared Lea, before Robin could speak for himself. "He is an honest man, and he will see justice done!"

Lois had been standing like one dazed, but she now staggered to her sister.

"Lea, Lea—my God!" she cried. "You do not mean it—you cannot mean it! Why do you say such horrible things? Oh, I am nearly crazed!"

Lea caught her in her arms.

"Bear up, little sister," she whispered. "Try to be brave. I know it must be a horrible shock, but you must stand it some way."

"It is not true!" sobbed Lois. "Father, poor, poor father—"

"Lois!"

Justin Douglas spoke; she turned and looked at him; he held out his hand.

"Lois, my wife, you do not believe this terrible charge against me?"

Lea tried to cling to her sister, but, with a wild cry, Lois broke away.

"No, no!" she almost shrieked. "Believe it? I would not believe it if an angel from Heaven made the accusation!"

He leaped forward and caught her swooning in his arms.

A terrible fury seized Lea. She saw how fruitless had been her attempts to convince her sister of the man's perfidy, and a maddening rage took possession of her. A small revolver came to her hand, and she took a step that brought the muzzle of the weapon almost against the back of the unguarded man's head.

Justin Douglas was kissing the unconscious woman in his arms when Lea's voice rung out:

"Blood for blood! Thus I avenge the murder of my father!"

The revolver spoke!

Just in time to save a life, Robin Rockwell dashed up the hand of the infuriated girl. As it was, the bullet barely missed lodging in Justin Douglas's brain.

A cry of despair broke from Lea's lips.

"Stop!" cried Robin. "Girl, you are indeed crazed! Would you stain your hands with blood?"

"I would avenge my father!"

"Let the law do that."

Lea's strength was gone, and he assisted her to a chair, into which she sunk, covering her face with her hands.

Meantime, Justin Douglas was trying to arouse his almost unconscious wife. The shot had staggered him, but, having been saved from death, he took no further notice of the would-be girl avenger.

Robin did his best to calm Lea, who only shuddered now and then, panting all the while like a creature that is quite exhausted.

After a little Justin carried Lois to the small back room, and placed her on the bed. He spoke to her. Her eyes were wide open and her lips moved, but she spoke no word.

At length he returned to the front room and stood looking at Lea.

"How is she?" asked Robin, referring to Lois.

Justin shook his head.

"I fear the shock will kill her."

Like a flash Lea started up.

"Then you will be a double murderer!" she cried. He put out a hand.

"You do not know the magnitude of your injustice!"

"You still deny the crime?"

"I surely do."

"You shall be brought to justice!"

"It is injustice, I fear—not justice."

"That sounds well, but I know your black heart. I will go to my poor sister."

"That is right; see what you can do for her. But, for God's sake, say nothing more of this horrible affair!"

As Lea entered the back room, Justin turned to the tenderfoot and held out his hand.

"You saved my life," he said. "I want to thank you for that."

Robin drew back, refusing to take the hand.

"Not till you prove it free from the stain of blood," he grimly said.

"Do you believe me guilty?"

"I know not what to believe, for I have heard but one side of the story. Will you tell me your side?"

"I will tell you all there is to tell. Sit down here."

They sat down near the door, and Justin told a simple and straightforward tale. Looking into the narrator's eyes, Robin could not believe the man guilty of such a horrible crime. He listened to the end, and then he said:

"Your story is straight enough, Mr. Douglas, and it may be true. I sincerely hope it is. But how do you account for the presence of your bloodstained knife?"

"I cannot believe the knife mine."

"The negro is willing to swear he saw it in your possession when you first came to see Lea."

"When I first came to see her?"

"Yes."

"Let me think."

For some moments Justin was buried in thought, but he finally exclaimed:

"I have it!"

"Yes?"

"I did own a knife marked with my initials then, but I lost it about that time."

Robin looked incredulous.

"It is the truth," Justin Douglas soberly affirmed.

"I am ready to take my oath to that effect."

"A jury would consider the evidence against you, for all of such an oath."

Justin's head drooped.

"I suppose so," he muttered.

For a little while he was silent, and then he said:

"When was this murder committed—at exactly what hour?"

"That I do not know."

"Lois will swear I did not leave her for a minute after she came out of the house. If the murder was committed before that—Ah, well! there must be some way for me to prove my innocence!"

The two men sat and talked for a long time, and then Justin went to the back room to see how his wife was. He came back looking a little brighter.

"I think she will come round all right in time," he said. "Lea was singing to her, and her back was toward me. Lea's eyes bade me leave them. Lois did not see me at all."

The night wore on.

At length the sisters came from the back room, Lois leaning on Lea's arm. They came straight to Justin Douglas, who arose as they approached.

"Husband," said the fair-haired one, "Lea has consented to give you a chance to prove your innocence. I am sure you can do that."

He opened his mouth to reply when, of a sudden, the tramp of horses' feet were heard outside the cabin.

Robin Rockwell leaped to the door and looked out into the moonlight.

"Masked horsemen!" he cried, flinging the door shut and placing the heavy bar.

Justin Douglas quickly extinguished the light, and then he peered from a window.

"They are Captain Shadow and the Trail Pirates!" he declared.

The horsemen drew rein outside and Captain Shadow hailed:

"Hello, within!"

"Hello!" was Justin's reply. "What do you want?"

"Come out here, you."

"Not much!"

"Then we'll snake you out!"

"You will not find that an easy job. I have you covered, and I will shoot you right where you live if you do not make yourself less around here."

"I want to talk business with you."

"Well, I am talking business with you."

"You refuse to come out?"

"Yes."

"You have a woman in there?"

"What of that?"

"You had better have some regard for her."

"I do. Get out of this, or I will rid this section of the country of a curse!"

"All right; have it to suit yourself, but you shall be made sorry for this."

With that threat, Captain Shadow wheeled and rode back from the cabin. At a certain distance he halted and his men gathered around him. There were six of them in all.

Five—ten minutes passed.

All at once Robin Rockwell commanded:

"Be quiet!"

Those within the cabin listened. To their ears came a soft crackling sound that drove the blood rushing to their hearts.

At that moment a shout went up from the Trail Pirates.

"Great Heavens!" cried Justin Douglas. "Those devils have found some way to fire the cabin. We will be forced out by the flames, and then they will probably shoot us down like dogs!"

"It looks as if we were in a death-trap!" came from Robin's lips.

CHAPTER XVII.

EXONERATED.

THE Trail Pirates did not see the negro as he came rushing toward them. Wild Bill followed his Sable Pard, and when he was quite near the outlaws, he began firing and yelling like a whole tribe of Indians.

His first shots emptied two saddles and Black Joe brought down a horse.

The attack was quite unexpected, and the three surviving bandits instantly turned to flee. Two of them got away, but Bill succeeded in emptying another saddle before they were out of range.

It was Captain Shadow whose horse had been shot down by the negro, and for a moment the chief was stunned. He soon arose to his feet and Joe grappled with him.

The outlaw chief drew a knife.

"You infernal black devil!" he grated. "I will wipe you out before I go under!"

But Joe caught his wrist. Then followed a battle for life that was brief and savage. In the end, the negro wrested the knife from the outlaw's grip and used it on its owner.

Then both went to the ground together and lay still.

By this time the four men who had been within the burning cabin had escaped from it. They hurried to the spot where Wild Bill was bending over his Sable Pard.

"Joe, Joe!" called Bill, "are you hurt bad?"

A groan was the reply at first.

"How bad are you hurt?" asked the Pistol King.

"Let me see."

"It's no use, Bill," declared the negro, in a husky whisper. "You have been kind to a black man—you have been kind to a common black man. I got

it for good back there before you risked your life to tote me away on your back. Bill I'm going up higher, and I won't forget you. I'll try to speak a good word for the one who used a black man like he was an equal."

Bill was strangely touched. A blinding mist came over the eyes which seldom grew dim and he choked when he tried to speak.

As the others came up, Captain Shadow, who had lain like a dead man, suddenly struggled up on his elbow, glaring wildly around.

"Dying!" he gasped, his eyes bulging with horror. "This is the end! My God! what a mad thirst for crime has possessed me! And now—choking—choking—"

He tore the mask from his face and cast it aside. As he did so, a cry of amazement broke from Justin Douglas's lips.

"Morris—my brother!"

"Yes, I am your brother," confessed the dying man. "Don't touch me, Justin! I have hated you—I know not why, I think I must have been mad! You were the favored one always, but that was not enough to drive me to such horrible deeds. I even longed to killed you! I was mad! My brain seems clearer now. I am dying!"

"Yes, you are bleeding! Let me—"

"Do not touch me, I say! I want to die! There is nothing that I should or could live for but the gallows! You are charged with murder, Justin, but it was I who killed Mother Vernon!"

"Heavens above!"

"It is true. I was possessed by a fiend, I think. I did it with your knife. You thought you had lost the knife—I stole it."

"I can see him now—there he sits! He does not know I am in the room—he did not see me enter, at the open window! I creep upon him—slowly, slowly, slowly! I have the knife ready! Ha!—he hears me—he turns! I spring—I strike with the knife—I have him by the throat! He does not cry out, for my fingers close his wind-pipe! I hold him till he lays limp, and then—he is dead!"

With a gurgling gasp of horror, Morris Douglas, the crime-stained, fell back a corpse!

"Those words exonerate me," huskily said Justin Douglas. "But—my God!—he was my brother!"

"A madman who was not responsible for his deeds!" said Robin Rockwell.

Lea and Lois had heard all, and, though nearly overcome by the horror of the scene, still something like a feeling of thankfulness filled the heart of each. In some way Lea managed to get hold of Justin's hand.

"Forgive me! forgive me!" she entreated.

"I honor and respect you for doing your best to bring the one to justice whom you believed murdered your father."

Wild Bill had been examining Black Joe's wound. The negro's heart was beating fainter and fainter, and Bill saw his minutes were numbered. Joe did not seem conscious of anything that was taking place around him. At length, he opened his eyes.

"It seems as if I heard a voice calling me from afar," he murmured. "It was a gentle voice. Did you hear it, Bill?"

"No, pard, I did not hear it."

"There, I hear it again. I think I must go now, Bill. I would feel happier if Miss Lea were here too."

"I am here, Joe—brave, faithful Joe!"

She was on her knees—she took his head in her arms and kissed his black forehead.

"Is that really you?" he asked, in wonder. "God must have guided me to you! I am going away, now. Good-by, Miss Lea." He fumbled till his black fingers found Wild Bill's hand. "Good-by, pard."

His eyes closed gently, and they saw he had "gone away."

Peaceful Pocket no longer exists. Wild Bill took good care to see that the place was purged of its worst characters, and the others deserted the town.

"Pacific Dick, Ivory Jaw Jackson, Stuttering Steve and Crook-necked Clark all met with violent deaths."

"Ferris Bloodgood" was Morris Douglas in disguise. With the craft of a maniac, as he undoubtedly was, he played that part for a purpose only known to himself. His heavy beard was an excellent disguise.

"Old Hunch" was Justin Douglas, but he did not intentionally lead Wild Bill into a trap, as Bill believed.

Robin Rockwell married Lea, and he made her a true and manly husband.

Justin Douglas took good care to clear his name of every vestige of the stain upon it, and then, with his sad-eyed yet happy young wife, he disappeared from view for a time. Later, it was ascertained that he was in South America, making a fortune in the cattle business.

To the day of his death Wild Bill would sometimes speak of his "Sable Pard," and once or twice he was able to visit Joe Armstrong's lonely grave. He was not accused of being a sentimental man, but he planted wild-flowers all about that grave.

Who could fathom the nature of such a man! Does it seem strange he was seldom understood? In his heart of hearts there were drops unmeasured. In him were combined the sternness of unrelenting fate and the tenderness of a child.

Let him rest!

THE END.

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13 The Dumb Spy.

- 41 Lasso Jack, the Young Mustang.
58 The Border King; or, The Secret Fox.

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74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.

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184 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.

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178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.

- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.

- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.

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- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy; or, Old Caleb Arbuckle.

- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.

- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.

- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
463 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.

- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
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513 The Demon Doctor; or, Deadhold, the Kid Detective.
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598 Flute, the Singer Detective; or, Owney in a New Role.
608 The Pitcher Detective's Foll; or, Dan's Double Play.
616 The Ocean Detective; or, The Last Cruise of the Black Bear.
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819 Captain Mystery; or, Five in One.
831 Daisy Dare the Sport from Denver.
857 Old Bombshell, the Ranger Detective.
864 Iron Fern, the Man of Fire; or, Among the Vultures.
869 The Boy Tramp Detective; or, The Double Grip Witness.
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836 Sharper Stoke's Double Deal.
857 Spotter Bob in New York.
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100 Lasso and Lasso; or, The Children of the Chaco.
154 The Sword Hunters; or, The Land of the Elephant Riders.
159 The Lost Captain; or, Skipper Jabez Coffin's Cruise.
200 The Boy Bedouins; or, The Brothers of the Plumed Lance.
214 Wolfgang, the Robber of the Rhine.
249 Milo Romer, the Animal King; or, Round the World.
265 The Tiger Tamer; or, The League of the Jungle.
331 Black Nick, the Demon Rider.
395 California Joe's War Trail.

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46 Glass-Eye, the Great Shot of the West.
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60 The White Indian; or, The Scout of the Yellowstone.
70 Old Zip's Cabin; or, The Greenhorn in the Woods.
81 Lightning Jo, the Terror of the Prairie.
85 Buck Buckram; or, Boss, the Female Trapper.
247 Old Grizzly and His Pets; or, The Wild Huntress.
251 Light-house Lige; or, Osceola, the Firebrand.
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106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
123 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
139 Judge Lynch Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
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169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy; or, The Mad Hunter.
198 Arkancaw; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tonknot's Crusade.
231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowls.
267 The Buckskin Detective; or, The King of Road-agents.
279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowls Blade of Gochetopa.
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610 Old Skinner, the Gold Shark; or, Tony Sharp on Guard.
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- 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
- 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Double Cross Sign.
- 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
- 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonds Bill.
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- 205 Deadwood Dick's Doom; or, Calamity Jane's Adventure.
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- 221 Deadwood Dick's Death-Plant.
- 262 Gold-Dust Dick. A Romance of Roughs and Toughs.
- 263 Deadwood Dick's Divide; or, The Spirit of Swamp Lake.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail.
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- 321 Deadwood Dick's Dozen; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
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- 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds.
- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
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- 458 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Full Hand.
- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Big Round-Up.
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- 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dog Detective.
- 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Deadwood.
- 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Compact.
- 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Diggings.
- 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr. the Wild West Video.
- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr. on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Nevada.
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- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Among the Smugglers.
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- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Back in the Mines.
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- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dollars.
- 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Danger Divide.
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- 704 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Jack-Pot.
- 710 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in San Francisco.
- 716 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Still Hunt.
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- 740 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Deathwatch.
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- 764 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Lone Hand.
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- 776 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Resurrection.
- 782 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dark Days.
- 787 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Defied.
- 792 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double Device.
- 797 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Desperate Venture.
- 802 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Diamond Dice.
- 807 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Royal Flush.
- 812 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Head-off.
- 816 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Rival.
- 822 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Boom.
- 828 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Scoop.
- 834 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Proxy.
- 840 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Clutch.
- 845 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s High Horse.
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- 858 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Death-Hole Hustle.
- 863 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Bombshell.
- 870 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Mexico.
- 876 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Decoy Duck.
- 882 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Silver Pocket.
- 891 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dead-Sure Game.
- 898 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double Drive.
- 904 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Trade-Mark.
- 910 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Tip-Top.
- 916 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Double-Decker.
- 928 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Dollarville.
- 934 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Flush Flats.
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- 951 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Right Bower.
- 957 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Ten-Strike.
- 965 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Gold-Dust.
- 971 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Onth.
- 977 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Death-Doom.
- 986 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Best Card.
- 992 Deadwood Dick, Jr. at Gold Dust.
- 998 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Big Play.
- 1005 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Branded.
- 1011 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Dutch Pard.
- 1018 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s Big Four.

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- 1024 Dandy Dick, Detective.

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- 1026 The Three Spotters' Weird Hunt.
- 1048 The Street Spotters' Weird Hunt.
- 1058 The Three Spotters' Dead Mystery.

Other Novels by E. L. Wheeler.

- 80 Rosebud Rob; or, Nugget Ned, the Knight.
- 84 Rosebud Rob on Hand; or, Idyl, the Girl Miner.
- 88 Rosebud Rob's Reappearance; or, Photograph Phil.
- 121 Rosebud Rob's Challenge; or, Cinnamon Chip.
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- 281 Denver Doll's Victory; or, Skull and Crossbones.
- 285 Denver Doll's Decoy; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
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- 372 Yreka Jim's Prize; or, The Wolves of Wake-Up.
- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Nose.
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- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 253 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
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- 339 Kangaroo Kit's Racket; or, The Pride of Played-Out.
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- 96 Watch-Eye, the Detective; or, Arabs and Angels.
- 117 Gilt-Edged Dick, the Sport Detective.
- 145 Captain Ferret, the New York Detective.
- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 226 The Arab Detective; or, Snoozer, the Boy Sharp.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
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- 343 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Detective.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Bass Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabides, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 454 Jim Benk and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 26 Cloven Hoof, the Buffalo Demon; or, The Border Vultures.
- 32 Bob Woolf; or, The Girl Dead-Shot.
- 45 Old Avalanche; or, Wild Edna, the Girl Brigand.
- 53 Jim Bludsoe, Jr., the Boy Phoenix.
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- 92 Canada Chet; or, Old Ananias in Sitting Bull's Camp.
- 113 Jack Hoyle, the Young Speculator.
- 125 Bonanza Bill, Miner; or, Madam Mystery, the Forger.
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- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher; or, A Son's Vengeance.
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- 579 Broadway Billy's Surprise Party.
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- 775 Broadway Billy's Shadow Chase.
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- 786 Broadway Billy's Tenm; or, The Combine's Big Pull.
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- 800 Broadway Billy Baffled.
- 805 Broadway Billy's Signal Scoop.
- 810 Broadway Billy's Wipe Out.
- 815 Broadway Billy's Bank Racket.
- 821 Broadway Billy's Bluff.
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- 839 Broadway Billy's Big Boom.
- 844 Broadway Billy's Big Bulge.
- 849 Broadway Billy's \$100,000 Snap.
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- 868 Broadway Billy Shadows London Slums.
- 874 Broadway Billy's French Game.
- 880 Broadway Billy and the Bomb-Throwers.
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- 889 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Clibuta John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Disco Dan, the Dally Dude.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 524 The Engineer Detective; or, Redlight Ralph's Resolve.
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer; or, The Double Case.
- 592 The Boy Pinkerton; or, Running the Rascals Out.
- 615 Fighting Harry, the Chief of Chained Cyclones.
- 640 Bareback Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typewriter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
- 659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Plzenest" Man of Ante Bar.
- 887 Battery Bob, the Dock Detective.
- 894 Arizona Dick's Wipe-Out.
- 900 Jumping Jack's Jubilee.
- 906 Safety Sam, the Cycle Sport.
- 912 Train Boy Trist's Hot Hustle.
- 918 The Trump Dock-Boy.
- 924 Big Boots Bob, the Fire-Ladder.
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- 935 The Ex-Newboy Detective's Chum.
- 941 The Bowling Green Detective's Drop.
- 944 Cowboy Charlie's Double.
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- 960 The Broadway Sport; or, Fliver Fred's Clear Case.
- 967 \$1000 Reward; or, The Rival Reporters' Sleek Scoop.
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- 978 Plucky Pat, the Street-Boy Detective.
- 989 Bicycle Bob's Hot Search.
- 997 Scorching Sam, the Detective on Wheels.
- 1004 Scorching Sam's Sweep-Strike.
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- 1042 Little Grit, the Pony Express Rider.
- 1040 Buffalo Bill's Pony Patrol.
- 1018 Buffalo Bill's Texas Team.
- 1007 Buffalo Bill's Sure-Shots.
- 1000 Buffalo Bill's Decoy Boys.
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- 942 Buffalo Bill's Tough Tussle.
- 936 Buffalo Bill's Boy Mascot; or, Joe Jarvis' Hold-up.
- 929 Buffalo Bill's Crack-shot Pard.
- 650 Buffalo Bill's Boy Pard; or, Butterfly Billy.
- 216 Bison Bill, the Prince of the Plains.
- 222 Bison Bill's Clue; or, Grit, the Bravo Sport.

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- 55 Dead-Eye, the Unknown Scout; or, The Banded Brotherhood.
- 48 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 158 Fanny Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.
- 1029 The Phantom Spy.
- 1038 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.

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- 191 Buffalo Billy, the Boy Bullwhacker.
- 194 Buffalo Bill's Bet; or, The Gambler Guide.

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- 1037 The Artist Detective.
- 1034 The Gold Witch's Shadower.
- 1031 The Texan Hustlers in Cuba.
- 1027 The Cowboy Raiders in Cuba.
- 1025 The Flying Yankee; or, The Ocean Outcast.
- 1023 The Cowboy Clan in Cuba.
- 1016 The Boy Eagle in Cuba.
- 932 New York Nat's Drop; or, Ex-Ferret Sykes' Bold Game.
- 926 New York Nat and the Traitor Ferret.
- 920 New York Nat Trapped.
- 914 New York Nat's Three of a Kind.
- 908 New York Nat's Double.
- 902 New York Nat's in Colorado.
- 896 New York Nat in Gold Nugget Camp.
- 889 New York Nat's Deadly Deal.
- 885 New York Nat's Crook-Chase.
- 877 New York Nat's Trump Card.
- 871 New York Nat and the Grave Ghouls.
- 865 New York Nat's Masked Mascot.
- 859 New York Nat, the Gamble Detective.
- 853 Dick Doom's Kidnapper Knock-Out.
- 847 Dick Doom's Ten Strike.
- 842 Dick Doom's Flush Hand.
- 772 Dick Doom's Death-Grip; or, The Detective by Destiny.
- 777 Dick Doom's Destiny; or, The River Blackleg's Terror.
- 784 Dick Doom; or, The Sharps and Sharks of New York.
- 788 Dick Doom in Boston; or, A Man of Many Masks.
- 793 Dick Doom in Chicago.
- 798 Dick Doom in the Wild West.
- 803 Dick Doom's Clean Sweep; or, Five Links in a Clue.
- 808 Dick Doom's Death Clue.
- 813 Dick Doom's Diamond Deal.
- 819 Dick Doom's Girl Mascot.
- 829 Dick Doom's Shadow Hunt.
- 835 Dick Doom's Big Hand.
- 749 Dashing Charlie; or, The Kentucky Tenderfoot's First Trail.
- 756 Dashing Charlie's Destiny; or, The Renegade's Captive.
- 760 Dashing Charlie's Pawned Pard.
- 766 Dashing Charlie, the Rescuer.
- 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
- 737 Buck Taylor, the Comanche's Captive.
- 743 Buck Taylor's Boys; or, The Red Riders of the Rio Grande.

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- 589 Tom-Cat and Pard; or, The Dead Set at Silver City.
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- 638 Tom-Cat's Triumph; or, Black Dan's Great Combine.
- 546 Captain Cactus, the Chaparral Cock; or, Josh's Ten Strike.
- 568 The Dandy of Dodge; or, Rustling for Millions.
- 576 The Silver Sport; or, Josh Peppermint's Jubilee.
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- 601 Happy Hans, the Dutch Video; or, Hot Times at Round-Up.
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- 657 Warbling William, the Mountain Mountebank.
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- 676 Signal Sam, the Lookout Scout.
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- 733 Toltec Tom, the Mad Prospector.
- 745 Kansas Jim, the Cross-Cut Detective.
- 761 Marmaduke, the Mustang Detective.
- 773 The Rustler of Rolling Stone.
- 785 Lone Hand Joe, the Committee of One.
- 801 Kent Kirby, the High-Kicker from Killbuck.
- 832 The Doctor Detective in Texas.
- 872 Two Showmen Detectives in Colorado.
- 937 The Texan Firebrand; or, Brazos Billy's Snap-Shot.
- 961 The Tramp's Trump-Track.

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